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# SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈہ روزنامہ بنگلور

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## Negi is 1st woman Principal Chief Conservator of Forests

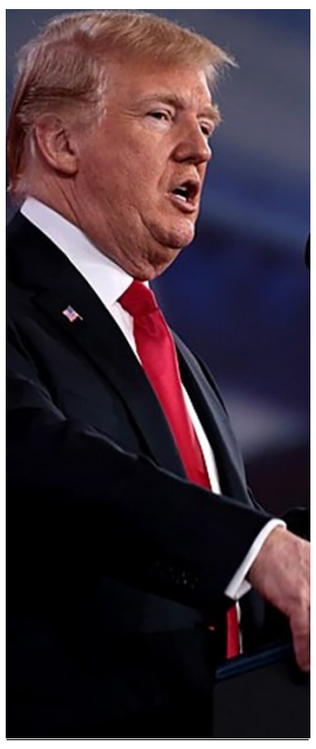
**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

Senior Indian Forest Service officer Meenakshi Negi was appointed as the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests on Thursday, officials said. Negi, a 1989-batch IFS officer of the Karnataka cadre, will be the first woman to hold the top post in the Karnataka Forest Department, they added. She has held several central government positions, and before she was appointed the head of the forest force in Karnataka, she served as the Member Secretary of the National Commission for Women. In the past, she has served in the Karnataka Forest Department at various levels, including as the Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests.

*—PTI*

# Biden tried to elect someone else in India LS polls: Trump

## BJP blames Cong for influencing polls amid $21M USAID row



**NEW YORK, 20 FEB**

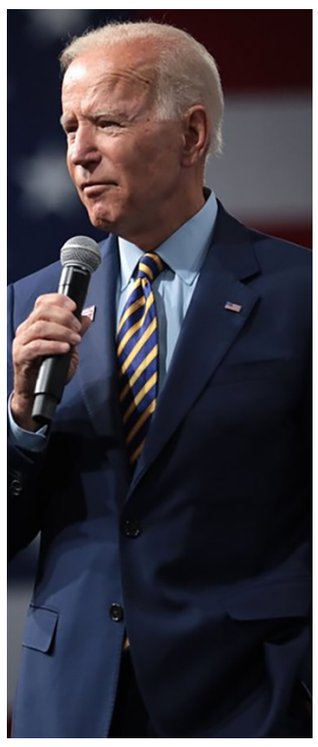
US President Donald Trump has once again questioned the Biden administration's decision to allocate USD 21 million to India for "voter turnout", guessing that they were trying to "get somebody else elected".

Trump made these remarks while addressing the FII PRIORITY Summit in Miami on Thursday.

On Wednesday, he questioned the purpose of providing USD 21 million to India for "voter turnout" as he reiterated that the US "can hardly get in there" because of high Indian tariffs.

His remarks came after the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) disclosed that USAID contributed USD 21 million to the Election Commission to boost voter turnout in India. DOGE noted that all of the items have been cancelled. "We have got to tell theIndian Government because when we hear that Russia spent USD 2 in US , it was a big deal... This is a breakthrough, USD 21 million for Indian elections, and USD 29 million to strengthen the political landscape in Bangladesh... Asia is doing well, we don't need to give them money," he said. BJP sought to link Trump's comments and Rahul Gandhi's 2023 remarks apparently ruing lack of concerns abroad to protect democracy in the country, claiming that the NGOs aligned to the Congress tried to influence elections here. Former Union minister and senior BJP leader Ravi Shankar Prasad played audio clips of Trump and Rahul, who had made the comments in the UK in 2023, to slam the Congress. "If Indian democracy collapses, in my view, democracy on the planet suffers a very serious, possibly fatal blow. You must be aware of what is happening in India — the idea of a democratic model is being attacked and threatened," he had said. Congress dismissed Trump's claim as "nonsensical" and demanded that the government bring out a white paper on the US agency's support to India. *—PTI*

***>>>More on Page 3***



'VERY DISTURBING'

# SC stays Lokpal inquiry into HC judges

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

Supreme Court has temporarily suspended a Lokpal order that allowed for complaints against sitting high court judges, describing the situation as "very disturbing" and a threat to judicial independence.

A bench comprising Justices BR Gavai, Surya Kant and Abhay S Oka issued a notice to the Centre, Lokpal registrar, and the individual who lodged complaints against a sitting high court judge, setting a return date for 18 March at 10.30 am. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta clarified that high court judges do not fall under the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013. The Supreme Court intervened following a suomotu case prompted by the Lokpal's order on 27 January. It barred the complainant from revealing the judge's identity and mandated confidentiality in the complaint process.

Justice Gavai emphasised the implications of the Lokpal's jurisdiction, stating, "Once the finding that the Lokpal has jurisdiction stands stayed, we are aware of the ramifications of this order." The Lokpal had directed the cases against a sitting additional high court judge to be forwarded to the Chief Justice of India for further guidance, noting that it was premature to assess the merits of the allegations. The complaints asserted that the judge had influenced other judicial decisions due to prior connections with a private company involved in litigation against the complainant. *—PTI*

# Delhi Cabinet visits Yamuna after oath

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

At its maiden meeting on Thursday, the newly-formed Delhi Cabinet approved the implementation of the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme in the capital, discussed Mahila Samriddhi Yojna, and also decided to table 14 pending CAG reports in the first session of the eighth Assembly.\

Hours after taking oath as the Chief Minister of Delhi, Rekha Gupta, along with her Cabinet colleagues, reached Vasudev Ghat to perform Yamuna aarti.

Addressing her first press conference as Delhi chief minister, Rekha Gupta said the AAP government did not allow the Ayushman Bharat health scheme in the city, thus preventing people from availing its benefits.

The Cabinet headed by Gupta passed two agenda items at its first meeting.

Hours after taking oath as the Chief Minister of Delhi, Rekha Gupta, along with her Cabinet colleagues, reached Vasudev Ghat to perform Yamuna aarti
P*HOTO: PTI*

Under the scheme approved by the Cabinet, a total of Rs 10 lakh health cover will be provided to each beneficiary, with the Centre and Delhi government contributing Rs 5 lakh each. "The formalities will be completed soon, and the scheme's implementation will begin at the earliest," she said. *—PTI*

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## MEET THE DELHI CABINET

**Rekha Gupta, 50:** Home, finance, services, vigilance, planning.

**Parvesh Verma, 47:** Education, public works department, transport.

**Ravindra Kumar Indraj, 50:** Social welfare, SC/ST affairs, labour.

**Pankaj Kumar Singh, 48:** Law, legislative affairs, housing.

**Manjinder Singh Sirsa, 52:** Health, urban development, and industries.

**Ashish Sood, 59:** Revenue, environment, and food & civil supplies.

**Kapil Mishra, 44:** Water, tourism, culture.

> **The previous government had stalled the Ayushman Bharat scheme in Delhi**
> -Rekha Gupta, CM

## INDIA'S GDP GROWTH TO SLOW TO 6.4%: MOODY'S

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

Moody's Analytics said India's growth will slow to 6.4 per cent in 2025, from 6.6 per cent in 2024, as new US tariffs and softening global demand weigh on exports.

In its report titled 'Asia-Pacific Outlook: Chaos Ahead', Moody's Analytics said growth across the Asia-Pacific economy will slow in 2025 as trade tensions, policy shifts, and uneven recoveries knock the region's fortunes.

It projected Chinese GDP growth slowing to 4.2 per cent in 2025 and 3.9 per cent in 2026 from 5 per cent in 2024.

Growth in India will creep into the low-6 per cent range in the coming years from 6.6 per cent in 2024. *—Agencies*

## GBS CLAIMS MAN'S LIFE IN BELAGAVI

**BELAGAVI, 20 FEB**

The spread of Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS) that broke out in a few states has claimed its first life in Karnataka with the death of a person in Belagavi.

The health department said a 64-year-old man from Nippani taluk, who was suffering from GBS, died in a private hospital in Kolhapur, Maharashtra.

Belagavi District Health Officer Dr SS Gadad, quoting the report of GBR Hospital, where the person was undergoing treatment, confirmed that it is the first death due to GBS in the state. The death has created concern among people living in Karnataka's districts adjoining Kolhapur and Sangli in Maharashtra. GBS mainly affects the nervous system and worsens quickly in people with low immunity.

The spread of the disease in Pandarpur, Pune, Kolhapur and Sangli districts in Maharashtra has made headlines recently.

*—Salar News*

# Break it like Shami: 200 ODI wickets & a record

**DUBAI, 20 FEB**

Mohammed Shami has made history by becoming the fastest Indian bowler and the second quickest overall to claim 200 ODI wickets, achieving the landmark during a Champions Trophy match against Bangladesh.

Shami reached this milestone in just 104 matches, surpassing former Indian pacer Ajit Agarkar, who achieved the feat in 133 matches.

Shami delivered an exceptional performance with figures of 5/53, contributing significantly to India's bowling attack as they seek success in the tournament. With 60 wickets in 50-over ICC events, Shami has now established himself as India's leading wicket-taker in both the ODI World Cup and Champions Trophy, edging out Zaheer Khan (59) and Javagal Srinath (47). His 200th wicket was Jaker Ali. *—PTI*

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# Muslim man held for 'inciting' Mysuru unrest

**MYSURU, 20 FEB**

The City Crime Branch (CCB) unit of Mysuru police, which has been investigating the recent attack on Udayagiri Police Station, on Thursday arrested a Muslim religious leader on charges of inciting violence.

The arrest of Moulvi Mufti Mushtaq Maqbooli for provoking Muslim youths, leading to the stone pelting on the police station, comes after 11 days of the incident.

Sources said Maqbooli is accused of inciting the Muslim youths to attack the person involved in posting some "derogatory remarks" on social media on the night of 10 February.

The police have also arrested four youths who allegedly pelted stones at the vehicles of Mysuru city police. Several police personnel suffered injuries and seven vehicles were damaged in the incident. Meanwhile, Krishnaraja MLA TS Srivatsa said police were under pressure to arrest Maqbooli, following directions from Home Minister G Parameshwara. He also accused the government of not giving the police a free hand to arrest the youths.

Srivatsa said he will meet City Police Commissioner Seema Latkar regarding Maqbooli's arrest. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Law and Order) M Mutturaj, who is also the executive magistrate, has served a show cause notice on Satish alias Panduranga, who was granted bail after his arrest for posting the derogatory remarks on social media.

In the notice, Mutturaj has asked Panduranga to file his objections to Udayagiri Police Inspector Sudhakar's request to extern him from the district for a certain period. Sudhakar told the court that the police department received intelligence reports of miscreants conspiring to indulge in more violence, damage to public property and disruption of law and order following his release on bail. *—Salar News*

'WE LIVE IN 2 INDIAS'

# *Centre cautions OTTs over vulgar content*

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

In response to growing concerns over inappropriate content on social media, the Indian government has issued a stern advisory to over-the-top (OTT) platforms, urging strict compliance with existing laws and regulations. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has warned against the dissemination of vulgar and obscene material and is insisting that OTT providers adhere to the Code of Ethics outlined in the IT Rules of 2021.

The ministry's advisory follows a flurry of complaints from Members of Parliament, statutory organisations, and the public regarding the proliferation of objectionable material on various OTT platforms. The directive emphasises the need for platforms to enforce stringent age-based classification of their content and to take proactive measures against any breaches of the established Code of Ethics.

According to the advisory, the Code mandates that OTT platforms refrain from transmitting content deemed illegal, implement access control mechanisms for adult-rated content, and exercise caution in their content delivery.

This action comes on the heels of remarks from the Supreme Court, which highlighted a regulatory "vacuum" concerning content shared on social media, noting the lack of oversight around platforms such as YouTube. *—PTI*

A huge row erupted after Ranveer Allahabadia cracked a vulgar joke on one Samay Rain's 'India's Got Latent' show recently *PHOTO: SCREENGRAB*

## NO DIGNITY FOR WOMEN AT KUMBH?

..meanwhile, photos of women bathing and changing clothes at Maha Kumbh are allegedly being sold on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Telegram. These videos are reportedly priced between Rs 1,999 and Rs 3,000. Telegram channels are also offering CCTV footage showing women being examined by doctors or nurses — many of the videos show private parts being examined. However, UP police said it has registered FIRs against handles for posting fake videos from Pakistan as those from Kumbh.

## Furious farmers bring crocodile to GESCOM office

**KALABURAGI, 20 FEB**

A group of farmers in Kalaburagi, who were protesting against the Gulbarga Electricity Supply Company (GESCOM) against the supply of power to the farms at 4am, on Thursday gave the officials a taste of the danger what awaits them in the fields at such odd hours. They brought to the office a crocodile tied to a bullock cart. A farmer named Lakshman Pujari in Gobbur B village of Afzalpur taluk had spotted the crocodile in his field when he went to release water for his wheat crop at around 4am on Thursday. The farmers were protesting against the timing of the power supply, which currently begins at 4am, which force them to work in fear. They demanded that the supply time be shifted to 6am. Sub Inspector Rahul Pawade from the Deval Gangapur police station convinced the farmers to handover the crocodile to the Forest Department officials for release. *—Salar News*

## Airforce Hospital conducts organ retrieval ops

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

Command Hospital Air Force Bangalore conducted a significant organ retrieval operation. The donor, a serving soldier on leave, suffered severe head trauma in a road traffic accident. An organ retrieval team flew in New Delhi to retrieve the corneas, liver, and one kidney, while another team from Chennai retrieved the heart and lungs. The Command Hospital closely coordinated with Bengaluru police to establish a 'green corridor.' in order to ensure seamless transportation. *—PTI*

## 2 women duped of ₹87 lakh in Mysuru online scam

**MYSURU, 20 FEB**

Two women, including a retired government employee, were scammed a total of ₹87 lakh through online schemes over the past week in Mysuru. One of the victims, a software engineer from Bogadi, was enticed to join a Telegram group called High Earning Hub. Unsuspecting, she was then lured into a WhatsApp group named "Navigation of the Cutting Edge of Stock," where cybercriminals encouraged her to invest in fraudulent trading platforms. She subsequently transferred ₹57.81 lakh in several transactions to accounts specified by the scammers. In a separate incident, a retired government employee was deceived out of ₹21.60 lakh after joining a WhatsApp group titled "Way to Wealth." The cases have been reported to the Cyber Crime Cell in Mysuru, which is actively pursuing investigations into these alarming scams. Police urge potential investors to remain vigilant of too-good-to-be-true investment opportunities. *—Salar News*

## KSHRC demands report on pregnant woman's detention

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

The Karnataka State Human Rights Commission (KSHRC) has requested a comprehensive report from KR Puram police regarding the illegal detention of a pregnant woman and her one-and-a-half-year-old child. Madhavi, the detained woman, was initially held under suspicion of theft after her neighbour reported a missing gold necklace. Despite being interrogated for hours, she was returned to the station the following day. Concerns regarding her treatment prompted her husband, Bharat, to escalate the matter to the HRC. The commission mandated the police to submit a report, including CCTV footage, by 4 March. *-Salar News*

# State to see above normal rain in pre-monsoon season

### A temperature drop is expected in the last week of February

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

State is expected to witness above normal rainfall during the pre-monsoon season, with significant rainfall in April and May, officials said on Thursday.

This February, temperatures were 2.5 degree Celsius higher than usual, but the pre-monsoon season is expected to bring above-average rainfall, they added.

A cabinet sub-committee meeting, chaired by Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda, was held on Thursday to discuss the 2025 Rabi and Monsoon seasons, agriculture, drinking water supply, weather conditions, and reservoir water levels.

Officials briefed the ministers, stating, "Rainfall during the Rabi season has been below average, and precipitation from October to December is expected to decline."

A temperature drop is expected in the last week of the month.

Revenue Minister instructed officials to ensure there is no drinking water shortage across the State.

"Karnataka's 14 key reservoirs currently hold 535.21 TMC of water, around 60 per cent of the average storage. Last year, at the same time, the storage was 332.52 TMC," a statement from the Revenue Minister's office said.

The Water Resources department has been directed to provide a clear report on expected reservoir levels in the coming months and to ensure that drinking water needs are prioritised before releasing water for irrigation.

"Due to long-term water scarcity and water quality issues, drinking water is being supplied via tankers and borewells to 66 villages across 13 taluks in five districts—Chikkaballapur, Chitradurga, Tumakuru, Bengaluru Urban, and Ramanagara," the statement said.

The Revenue Minister also informed that Rs 488.30 crore is currently available in the PD accounts (Disaster Relief Fund) of all Deputy Commissioners and Tahsildars, ensuring that financial constraints will not hinder relief measures, they added. *—PTI*

- The temperature is expected to drop in the last week of the month, after temperatures were 2.5 degree Celsius higher than usual. The state is also expected to see an above average rainfall in April-May.

**AFTER LOKAYUKTA CLEAN CHIT**

# Knew MUDA case against CM would not hold says GTD

**MYSURU, 20 FEB**

Former minister and JD(S) core committee chief GT Devegowda on Thursday said Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has been lucky since he joined politics in the 1980s.

Referring to the Lokayukta giving a clean chit to the CM and his family members in the MUDA scam, the JD(S) leader said he knew from the beginning that the case would not hold water.

Siddaramaiah's wife Parvathi has never involved herself in any activities she was accused of because her husband became CM twice. Siddaramaiah also never set his eyes on money since he joined politics, Devegowda said. He also ruled out a change of CM as CM Siddaramaiah enjoys the support of the majority of Congress MLAs.

Meanwhile, BJP MLA TS Srivatsa said that Lokayukta probe is biased, and officials have failed to gather evidence.

'MUDA case against CM politically motivated'

Welcoming Lokayukta police's clean chit to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in MUDA site allotment case, several of his Cabinet colleagues on Thursday said the case was politically motivated, and a "plot by BJP and JD(S) to tarnish his political image".

The Lokayukta police probing the MUDA site allotment case has said that the charges against Siddaramaiah and others could not be proved for want of evidence.

Lashing out at the Lokayukta giving a clean chit to Siddaramaiah, BJP on Wednesday had said that their apprehensions about the Lokayukta investigations have come true.

Asking whether the BJP was questioning the probe itself, Home Minister G Parameshwara said, Lokayukta has come to a conclusion based on the evidence at hand. *—PTI*

## Lokayukta files 11,000-page final report

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

Lokayukta Police submitted a 11,000 page final report in the MUDA site allotment case to a Special Court on Thursday. The Special Court exclusively deals with criminal cases related to former and incumbent MPs/MLAs in Bengaluru, a senior official told PTI.

This came a day after a clean chit was given to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah.

On Wednesday in a notice to Snehamayi Krishna, the Lokayukta police said that they conducted the investigation and the allegations against the first four accused, and concluded that the case could not be proven due to lack of evidence.

# Even God can't fix B'luru infra in 2 to 3 years: DKS

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar and students during the inauguration of 'Namma Rasthe', a three days workshop programme, in Bengaluru on Thursday **PHOTOs: MOHAMMED ASAD**

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar remarked on Thursday that the city's infrastructural issues cannot be resolved overnight, stating, "even gods cannot improve the city's infrastructure within three years." He underscored the importance of long-term planning and consistent implementation.

At the inauguration of the three-day Namma Raste 2025 Workshop & Exhibition, along with the launch of the Traffic Laboratory at BBMP headquarters, Shivakumar advocated for prioritising safety, quality, and uniformity in road development. "We must plan today to ensure Bengaluru remains better in the future. If we fail, we are betraying the city," he said.

The event runs until 22 February and gathers government departments to discuss solutions for improving roads, footpaths, and alleviating traffic congestion. As Bengaluru's metro, suburban rail, and bus networks expand, discussions centre on integrated, multi-modal transport, promoting walkability, and enhancing last-mile connectivity. Shivakumar proposed standard designs for bus shelters and street poles to reduce visual clutter while incorporating local cultural artwork in metro structures.

A significant highlight was the release of Namma Raste Kaipidi, an illustrated handbook for designing and maintaining roads within BBMP limits. Shivakumar instructed BBMP to remove overhead cables and shift them underground, while acknowledging ongoing challenges with tunnel road construction and the white-topping of approximately 1,700 km of roads designed to last 30 years.

Earlier, he accused the BJP and JD(S) of a political conspiracy regarding the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA) issue, denying any involvement from Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. *—Salar News*

## MoD, BEL sign Rs 1,220 cr deal for Coast Guard radios

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

The Indian Ministry of Defence has finalised a contract worth ₹1220.12 crore with Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) for the procurement of 149 cutting-edge radios for the Indian Coast Guard. This initiative, announced on Thursday, aims to enhance secure and reliable communication, facilitating high-speed data sharing and providing situational awareness.

The software-defined radios will bolster interoperability during joint operations with the Indian Navy, significantly strengthening the Coast Guard's ability to fulfil its critical functions, including maritime law enforcement, search and rescue missions, fisheries protection, and marine environmental safeguarding.

This project aligns with the government's strategic objectives to reinforce maritime security while supporting the Blue Economy. Additionally, it adheres to the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiative, aimed at boosting India's self-reliance in defence manufacturing. The contract is expected to enhance the country's capabilities in advanced military-grade communication systems, generating employment opportunities and fostering the development of expertise within the sector. *—PTI*

# K'taka gets new spl investment regions

**MYSURU, 20 FEB**

The state government has declared Mysuru Hebbal and Mysuru Thandya as Special Investment Regions (SIR), fulfilling a long-pending demand of the industrialists.

The areas coming under the Mysuru Hebbal SIR include Hebbal, Hootagalli, Belavadi, Belagola, Kooragalli, Hebbal 2'a Phase and Single Unit Complex Industrial Areas.

Similarly, the areas under the Mysuru Thandya SIR include Adakanahalli, Kochanahalli, Kadakola, Immavu, Thandya 2nd Phase, Thandya 2nd Phase, Thandya, Women's Entrepreneur Park Phase 1, Women's Entrepreneur Park Phase 2, Single Unit Complex and Film City Industrial Areas.

The other SIRs declared by the government include Devanahalli Defence and Aerospace Park, Bidadi, Badanaguppe–Kallamballi, Vasanthnarasapur, Dobaset, Harohalli, Gowribidanur Hassan, Yadgir – Kadechur and Raichur, said a notification issued by the under secretary of the Commerce and Industries Department. *—Salar News*

## 11-year-old girl assaulted at Bengaluru madrasa

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

An 11-year-old girl has reportedly been assaulted by a man at a madrasa in Hegde Nagar, Bengaluru, with the incident occurring on February 16 and captured by CCTV cameras installed on the premises.

According to police, the victim's mother filed a complaint on Wednesday, stating that her daughter had been admitted to the 5th class at the madrasa's hostel in July 2024. The accused, identified as Mohammad Hasan, the son of the hostel in-charge, allegedly frequented the hostel.

On the afternoon of 16 February, the girl was summoned to the office, where Hasan reportedly physically assaulted her for allegedly spilling rice and getting into a quarrel with other hostel girls during playtime.

The Kothanur police have registered a case under Section 75 of the Juvenile Justice Act (punishment for cruelty to children) and Section 115 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (voluntarily causing hurt). Hasan has since been arrested in connection with the incident. *—PTI*

**CRIME BEAT**

## Chicken stall owner stabs Nigerian to death

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

A Nigerian national was allegedly stabbed to death on Wednesday morning by a chicken stall owner in the Bagalur police station limits, police said.

The deceased is identified as Adeola Sekiro, who resided in Bagalur, Bengaluru Urban. According to police, Sekiro went to the stall owned by Yasin Khan around 11.30am to buy chicken.

However, an argument broke out between the two over an undisclosed issue. When the altercation escalated into physical assault, Sekiro tried to flee, Khan reportedly chased him down and attacked him with a sharp weapon, killing him on the spot.

Police arrested Khan within hours of the incident and a case has been registered. *—Salar News*

## Man's body found on railway tracks in City

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

Railway Protection Force (RPF) personnel found the body of an unidentified man on the railway tracks between Nelamangala and Chikkajala stations, police said.

According to police, the deceased is between the ages of 25 and 30 and appeared to have been attacked with sharp weapons and killed elsewhere before his body was dumped on the tracks on Wednesday morning. They are yet to establish his identity.

Meanwhile, three youths were run over by a train while walking along the railway track near Muttur, close to Doddaballapur railway station.

The deceased were identified as Rahul, Lallan and Bikesh, all natives of Uttar Pradesh who lived and worked as carpenters in Muttur. *—Salar News*

**METRO EXTENDS TIMINGS**

# *Ahead of WPL, cops issue traffic restrictions*

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

In preparation for the TATA Women's Premier League 2025 T20 matches at M Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bengaluru City Police have announced significant traffic restrictions and parking advisories to manage crowds.

The first match is set for 21st February, running from 3pm to 11pm, with additional matches taking place from 22nd to 28th February and on 1st March.

To accommodate late-night travel, Bengaluru Metro Rail Corporation Limited has extended metro services on match days, with the last train departing at 11.20pm from terminal stations on the Purple and Green Lines.

Final departures from Nadaprabhu Kempegowda Station in Majestic will be at 11.55pm in all directions.

Parking will be prohibited in areas around the stadium while the last metro train will depart at 11.20pm **PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA**

Parking will be prohibited during match hours on key roads surrounding the stadium, including Queens Road, MG Road, Cubbon Road, Raj Bhavan Road, Kasturba Road, and St Mark's Road. Only BMTC buses will be permitted on Cubbon Road between Kamaraja Road and Dickenson Road.

Public parking facilities are available at St Joseph's Indian School Ground, UB City, and the first floor of the BMTC depot at Shivajinagar. KSCA members may utilise the parking at St Joseph's European School on Museum Road.

Due to limited parking availability, spectators are strongly encouraged to use public transport, such as BMTC buses and the metro.

For those using taxis, CTO Junction and Cubbon Road will serve as designated pick-up points, while drop-off zones include Cubbon Park Metro Station and Gate No. 6. The police emphasised the importance of not halting vehicles on main roads.

Authorities are appealing for cooperation to ensure smooth operations. *—Salar News*

**TILTED BUILDING DEMOLISHED**

BBMP demolishes a two-storey building in Bengaluru's Thippasandra on Thursday after it tilted **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

## Court dismisses Jain's defamation case against Bansuri

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

A Delhi court has dismissed a criminal defamation case brought by AAP leader Satyendra Jain against BJP MP Bansuri Swaraj. Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate Neha Mittal rejected the complaint, stating, "Cognisance declined. Dismissed." Jain's allegations arose from remarks Swaraj made during a television interview on 5 October 2023, during which she claimed that Rs 3 crore, 1.8 kilograms of gold, and 133 gold coins were recovered from his residence. Jain contended that these statements were false and intended to damage his reputation and secure political gain for Swaraj. He also accused her of labelling him as "corrupt" and a "fraud." *—PTI*

## Mail sent to cops threatens to blow up Shinde's car

**MUMBAI, 20 FEB**

The Mumbai police revealed that they have received emails threatening to detonate a bomb in the car of Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. An official confirmed that the emails were sent to the Goregaon and JJ Marg police stations earlier today, prompting an immediate investigation into the matter. Authorities are currently tracking the IP address of the sender and exploring all possible angles in the case. Additionally, it was reported that a senior police official had previously received a threatening phone call. The police have intensified their security measures in response to the threats, and further updates on the investigation are expected. *—PTI*

## HM urges northeast insurgents to surrender for peace

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

Union Home Minister Amit Shah has called on insurgents in the Northeast to abandon violence and embrace peace, highlighting their potential contributions to India's development. Speaking at the 'Unity Utsav - One Voice, One Nation' event organised by the Assam Rifles, Shah remarked that the region desires peace and integration within the nation. Shah noted a significant decrease in violence in the Northeast, claiming a 70 per cent reduction in conflict-related casualties over the past five years. He mentioned that over 10,000 insurgents have surrendered, and 12 peace accords have been inked with various groups. Stressing the importance of the Northeast's rich cultural and traditional heritage, which he deemed essential to India's identity, Shah declared, "Unity in diversity is our strength." He pointed out the region's diverse communities, languages, and festivals. *—PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

## Manipur Guv orders surrender of illegal arms within 7 days

**IMPHAL, 20 FEB**

Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla has urged the people of the strife-torn state to voluntarily surrender looted and illegally held weapons within seven days, assuring no punitive action would be taken against those giving up arms. However, Bhalla asserted that "strict action" would be taken after the expiry of the seven days. He said that the act of returning weapons can be a powerful gesture towards ensuring peace. He said all communities in the state must come forward to ensure cessation of hostilities and maintenance of peace and order in the society so that people can return to their normal day-to-day activities. The Centre imposed President's rule in Manipur on 13 February, days after Chief Minister N Biren Singh resigned. *—PTI*

# CM Rekha retains Home and Finance

## DyCM Parvesh Verma has been allotted Education, PWD & Transport ministries

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

Rekha Gupta was sworn in as the Chief Minister of Delhi on Thursday, leading a newly formed cabinet of six ministers, marking the BJP's return to power in the city after 26 years. The grand ceremony took place at Ramlila Ground, attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, senior BJP leaders, and NDA allies.

Gupta, the 50-year-old MLA from Shalimar Bagh, becomes Delhi's fourth female chief minister, following Sushma Swaraj, Sheila Dikshit, and Atishi. Notably, she is the only woman among the NDA chief ministers and the second woman chief minister in the country, after Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal.

Among her cabinet are prominent BJP figures, including Parvesh Verma, who won against Arvind Kejriwal, Kapil Mishra, and Manjinder Singh Sirsa. The ministers took their oath in Hindi, with Sirsa opting for Punjabi. At the swearing-in, Modi expressed confidence in Gupta's commitment to the city's development, high-lighting her grassroots political rise. The ceremony attracted around 50,000 attendees, adorned with marigold flowers and vibrant decorations, with music and chants celebrating the BJP.

Rekha has kept finance, services, vigilance, revenue, and women and child development, among other portfolios.

Parvesh has been allotted PWD, water, legislative affairs, irrigation and flood control, and gurdwara elections portfolios.

Meanwhile, BJP is expected to address pressing issues like Yamuna river pollution, infrastructure, and social welfare initiatives previously established by AAP, including free electricity and water access. *—PTI*

BJP supporters during the oath ceremony of the Delhi government at Ramlila Maidan, in New Delhi, on Thursday *PHOTO: PTI*

> **We will definitely fulfill all our promises, including financial support for women. Women will 100 per cent get monetary support into their accounts by 8 March**
>
> -Rekha Gupta, Delhi CM

> **She has risen from the grassroots, being active in campus politics, state organisation, municipal administration and now MLA as well as Chief Minister. I am confident she will work for Delhi's development with full vigour**
>
> -Narendra Modi, Prime Minister

> **Disturbing reports on social media on the new Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta's past abusive language and rowdyism. What a far cry from the hard working and gracious Sheila Dixit and the articulate parliamentarian Sushma Swaraj**
>
> -Sagarika Ghose, TMC MP

> **I congratulate her and the cabinet and wish them well. They have come up with a very broad and ambitious agenda, specially all the welfare measures they talk about. Let's hope they are able to fulfill their promises**
>
> -Sandeep Dixit, Congress leader

### PARVESH VERMA IS BJP'S JAT FACE IN DELHI CABINET

Parvesh Verma, a prominent figure in the BJP, first entered national politics in 2014 with a victory in the West Delhi Lok Sabha seat. His political profile soared after he notably defeated AAP leader and three-time Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in the recent Delhi Assembly elections.

A firebrand leader, Verma positioned himself as Kejriwal's competitor in the New Delhi constituency, a strategy reminiscent of Kejriwal's challenge to then-incumbent Sheila Dikshit in 2013.

Verma secured a narrow victory over Kejriwal by approximately 4,000 votes, and he holds the record for the highest victory margins in Delhi polls.

### PANKAJ SINGH: DEBUTANT MLA & FORMER DENTIST

Pankaj Kumar Singh, a debutant legislator and former dental surgeon, has been sworn in as a minister in the newly formed government led by Rekha Gupta. Singh, who represents the Vikaspuri constituency, won decisively with a margin of over 12,000 votes. He is the general secretary of the Delhi BJP's Poorvanchal Morcha, Singh represents the interests of a significant demographic in the capital – residents of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, collectively known as Poorvanchalis. His appointment underscores the party's strategic approach, particularly ahead of the upcoming Bihar elections.

### RAVINDER SINGH: DALIT LEADER AND FIRST-TIME MLA

Ravinder Indraj Singh, a first-time MLA and prominent Dalit leader within the Delhi BJP, was sworn in as a Cabinet minister in the newly formed Rekha Gupta government on Thursday. Singh, 50, represents the Bawana constituency after defeating AAP's Jai Bhagwan Upkar by over 31,000 votes. He has been an active member of the BJP's Scheduled Caste Morcha and has a Bachelor of Arts degree from Delhi University's School of Open Learning. According to his election affidavit, Singh holds assets exceeding Rs 7 crore, with no criminal cases against him. He joins five other leaders in the new Cabinet.

### KAPIL MISHRA: BJP CRITIC TO HINDUTVA POSTER BOY

Newly sworn-in Delhi Minister Kapil Mishra has undergone a complete transition -- from being an avowed AAP member and a bitter critic of the BJP, RSS and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to being regarded as the poster boy of Hindutva.

Mishra, 44, was an activist before he started his political journey. He was involved in anti-corruption movements during the 2010 Commonwealth Games in the national capital.

He began his political career with AAP and was elected as an MLA representing Karawal Nagar in 2015. At the time, Mishra would openly criticise the BJP, RSS and Modi.

## ONCE EXPELLED, VIJENDER IS NOW SPEAKER

A decade ago, Vijender Gupta, then Leader of Opposition, was dragged out of the Delhi Assembly. However, now the Rohini BJP MLA Gupta will chair the proceedings of the House. Old visuals of Gupta in a kurta-pyjama being carried by multiple security personnel have now resurfaced on social media.

Confirming his nomination by the party, Gupta told PTI, "I will first of all get the CAG reports that were kept pending by the previous AAP government tabled before the House."

The third-term Rohini legislator, along with other BJP MLAs, had approached the court earlier, alleging that the AAP government was preventing the tabling of 14 Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports on its performance. *—PTI*

### 71% OF NEWLY-SWORN IN MINISTERS FACE CRIMINAL CASES: ADR

- **29%** are billionaires
- Avg assets: **Rs.56.03 cr**
- Education: **86%** graduates or above
- Age: **71%** (41-50 yrs); **29%** (51-60 yrs)
- Only woman: **CM Rekha Gupta**
- Highest liabilities: Parvesh Singh: **Rs.74.36 cr**
- Least Wealthy: Kapil Mishra **Rs 1.06 cr**

Richest: Manjinder Sirsa **Rs. 248.85 cr**

## Rahul a tool for foreign agencies: BJP

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

The BJP has accused Congress leader Rahul Gandhi of acting as a 'tool for foreign agencies' following comments made by former US President Donald Trump about USAID funding aimed at influencing elections in India. Trump questioned the USD 21 million allocated for "voter turnout" initiatives in India, insinuating it was an attempt to influence the electoral process.

Amit Malviya, head of the BJP's IT department, linked Trump's remarks to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assertions during the recent Lok Sabha campaign that foreign powers sought to undermine his position. "Now, former President Trump has confirmed that there was indeed an attempt to influence the Indian election and install someone other than Prime Minister Modi," Malviya stated.

Malviya accused Gandhi of engaging with global networks that aim to undermine India's strategic interests, referencing a March 2023 visit to London where Gandhi allegedly urged foreign powers to intervene in India's affairs. In a separate development, Gandhi, during a two-day visit to his constituency in Raebareli, condemned Centre for allegedly diverting attention from issues such as inflation and prioritising capitalist interests. He urged Congress workers to strengthen their grassroots efforts amid claims from BJP workers that they were placed under house arrest during his visit. While BJP officials cited confinement, police had not confirmed the allegations. *—PTI*

## ASSAM CONG MP ATTACKED WITH CRICKET BATS WHILE ATTENDING CADRE MEETING

**GUWAHATI, 20 FEB**

Congress MP Rakibul Hussain, representing Dhubri, was attacked by unidentified assailants in Rupohihat, Nagaon district, Assam, on Thursday. The attackers, who obscured their faces with black cloth, assaulted him with cricket bats. Hussain's personal security officers attempted to intervene but were also targeted in the assault. Police arrived promptly, and the MP was subsequently taken to hospital. *—PTI*

## 'Pak man linked to Gogoi's wife visited India 18 times'

**GUWAHATI, 20 FEB**

- Himanta, BJP have been attacking Gogoi, the Deputy Leader of Congress in LS over his wife Elizabeth's 'connection' with Pakistan's spy agency ISI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said that the preliminary investigation has found that Pakistani national Ali Tauqeer Sheikh, who is allegedly linked to Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi's British wife, has visited India 18 times to date.

During a discussion on Motion of Thanks on the governor's speech, Sarma also claimed that the initial information in the case is "very fatal" for the Congress and will have a "huge impact" on the politics of Assam.

"Sheikh apparently works in a climate action group. But his tweets and social media activities are on Assam immigrants. These are an attempt to interfere in India's internal affairs," he added.

The Assam chief minister and the BJP have been attacking Gogoi, the Deputy Leader of Congress in Lok Sabha, over his wife Elizabeth Colburn's alleged connection with Pakistan's spy agency ISI.

The Assam Police on Monday constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe a case against the Pakistani national Ali Tauqeer Sheikh for his social media comments on Assam and India's internal affairs. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to visit Assam for two days starting 24 February, during which he will attend a world record dance event. *—PTI*

**POLITICAL SLUGFEST BEGINS**

## *Man who accused KCR of corruption killed*

**HYDERABAD, 20 FEB**

The murder of a man who filed complaint against former Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao and others alleging corruption in the Kaleshwaram irrigation project, kicked up a political slugfest with the family members of the deceased and the ruling Congress in Telangana pointing fingers at the BRS.

N Rajalingamurthy, 50, was stabbed to death by unidentified persons when he was going on a bike in Jayashankar Bhupalpally town by late evening on Wednesday. The accused came on two bikes hit the victim's head with an iron rod and stabbed him to death, police said.

Rajalingamurthy's wife, a former councilor of Bhupalpally Municipality, in a complaint to police said the accused persons killed her husband over a land dispute. A case was registered against five persons. However, the family members later alleged that some leaders associated with the BRS were responsible for Rajalingamurthy's death.

K Chandrasekhar Rao; N Rajalingamurthy *PHOTOS: X/PTI*

Addressing a press conference on Thursday, Telangana Roads and Buildings Minister Komatireddy Venkat Reddy accused BRS of encouraging murder politics. He claimed the victim was murdered because he questioned BRS.

Reacting to Venkat Reddy's accusations, Venkataramana Reddy said the Congress party is levelling charges against him without knowing the facts. He further said it was unfortunate that the ruling party is trying to link the murder with BRS party.

Venkataramana Reddy further said as per the FIR the murder was due to local land dispute.

A senior police officer said the investigations so far point to the murder being committed over a land dispute. However, they are verifying all allegations. "We are investigating the case. We have got few clues. We are probing all angles," the official said. *—PTI*

## 3 States present Budget

**Uttar Pradesh**

The Uttar Pradesh government has unveiled a significant budget of Rs 8.08 lakh crore for the financial year 2026, prioritising education, healthcare, and agriculture. The budget, presented by Finance Minister Suresh Khanna in the state assembly, allocates Rs 1,06,360 crore for education, Rs 50,550 crore for healthcare, and Rs 89,353 crore for agriculture and rural development.

Infrastructure development receives the largest slice of the budget, with Rs 1.79 lakh crore allocated, representing 22 per cent of the total. This includes substantial investments in the energy sector (Rs 61,070 crore), irrigation (Rs 21,340 crore), and urban development (Rs 25,308 crore), among others. An additional Rs 28,478.34 crore is reserved for new expenditure categories.

**Uttarakhand**

Uttarakhand Finance Minister Premchand Aggrawal unveiled a budget exceeding Rs 1 lakh crore for the 2025-26 fiscal year, prioritising innovation, agriculture, connectivity, and infrastructure development. The budget totals Rs 1,01,175.33 crore, comprising Rs 59,954.65 crore in revenue expenditure and a capital outlay of Rs 41,220.68 crore, marking an increase from last year's budget of over Rs 89,000 crore.

**Gujarat**

The Gujarat government presented a Rs 3.70 lakh crore budget for 2025-26, offering a tax relief of Rs 148 crore by reducing the stamp duty on mortgage deeds and the motor vehicle tax on electric vehicles. Finance Minister proposed to set up 'Gujarat Reforms Commission' for necessary changes in administrative procedures. *—PTI*

## Man locks ailing mother at home, goes to Kumbh

**RAMGARH, 20 FEB**

Ramgarh, Feb 20 (PTI) A man allegedly locked his ailing mother at home in Jharkhand's Ramgarh district and went to Prayagraj for a holy dip in Maha Kumbh along with his wife, children and in-laws, police said on Thursday. The police rescued the 65-year-old mother from a quarter of Central Coalfields Limited (CCL) in Subhash Nagar colony under Ramgarh police station limit on Wednesday. The woman was locked in the home since Monday and survived on Chura (flattened rice). The neighbours came to know about her when she cried in hunger for help, police said. Ramgarh Sub-Divisional Police Officer Parmeshwar Prasad said, "The elderly woman, identified as Sanju Devi, was locked by her son, Akhilesh Kumar, in his CCL quarter since Monday. Kumar along with his family went to Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj. She was rescued on Wednesday after her daughter informed police." *—PTI*

## Woman detained for assaulting boy over dog in lift

**NOIDA, 20 FEB**

A woman has been detained for allegedly assaulting a minor boy who objected to her bringing her pet dog into the lift of a residential building in Greater Noida. The incident occurred on Wednesday at the 12th Avenue Society in Gaur City 2. A video of the altercation went viral on Thursday, showing the woman entering the lift with her dog. When the boy expressed his concerns, the woman was seen dragging him out of the lift despite his pleas for her to stop. Police have since registered a case against the woman, with Central Noida Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Shakti Mohan Avasthy confirming her detention. "Further legal action is being taken against her," he stated. The video evoked backlash from residents of the residential society, who demanded accountability for the woman's actions. *—PTI*

## Goa government declares Hindi film 'Chhaava' tax-free

**PANAJI, 20 FEB**

The Goa government has declared the Hindi film "Chhaava", which portrays the life of the Maratha warrior king Chhatrapati Sambhaji, as tax-free in the state. Chief Minister Pramod Sawant announced the decision on Wednesday via a post on X, highlighting the inspirational sacrifice of Sambhaji Maharaj. He stated, "The movie, exploring the valor and courage of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj for Dev, Desh and Dharma, is bringing glorious history to the screen." Notably, the announcement coincided with the 395th birth anniversary of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Sambhaji's father. Madhya Pradesh's Chief Minister Mohan Yadav also declared the film tax-free in his state. Directed by Laxman Utekar, "Chhaava" stars Vicky Kaushal, Rashmika Mandanna, and Akshaye Khanna. *—PTI*

## Passenger detained over bomb remark at Kochi airport

**KOCHI, 20 FEB**

A passenger at Kochi International Airport has been booked after jokingly claiming that his luggage contained a "bomb." The incident occurred around 11.30pm on Wednesday when security officials inquired about the weight of Rasheed's luggage, prior to his flight to Kuala Lumpur. In response to the question, Rasheed, a resident of Kozhikode, made the inappropriate remark, prompting immediate action from airport security. The officials alerted the police, who subsequently took Rasheed into custody. A case has been registered against him, although he was released shortly thereafter, according to police sources. *—PTI*

# Videos of women bathing at Kumbh up for sale online

## Prices on Telegram range between ₹1,999 and ₹3,000

**PRAYAGRAJ, 20 FEB**

Photos of women bathing and changing clothes at Maha Kumbh are being shared and sold on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and are even available on porn sites.

The videos are reportedly being secretly shot and shared, according to India Today.

Snippets of these videos were being used as teasers to persuade users to buy full videos.

The videos range in price from Rs 1,999 to Rs 3,000 on Telegram channels 'Ganga River Open Bathing Group' and 'Hidden Bath Videos Group'.

According to Telemetrio, a Telegram search engine and analytics platform, there was a notable surge in the search term "open bathing" in India between 12 and 18 February.

Meanwhile, pages on Facebook that were promoting this obscene content were using hashtags like: #mahakumbh2025, #gangasnan, and #prayagrajkumbh while sharing their videos captioned- "Maha Kumbh Ganga Snan Prayagraj".

According to Telemetrio, a Telegram search engine and analytics platform, there was a notable surge in the search term "open bathing" in India between 12 and 18 February *PHOTO: TELEGRAM*

In one such video, a woman can be seen bathing in a river with her lower back and buttocks exposed. Unaware she is being recorded, she continues to bathe while the person filming her intentionally zooms in on her body.

Apart from the bathing videos and images of women, these Telegram channels also offer CCTV footage showing women being examined by doctors or nurses — many of them show their private parts being treated or examined.

Meanwhile, Uttar Pradesh police filed cases against two social media accounts for selling photographs of women bathing at Maha Kumbh.

The police have also sought help and information from Mark Zuckerberg-owned Meta, which is the umbrella under which top social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp operate.

Police have asked Meta to identify the account operator. The accused will be arrested once Meta releases the information. *—Agencies*

# Bodies of all 9 trapped in Assam mine recovered after 44 days

**GUWAHATI, 20 FEB**

The decomposed bodies of three more miners, trapped in a coal mine in Assam's Dima Hasao have been recovered, 44 days after they went missing in the quarry, an official said on Thursday.

The bodies were recovered late on Wednesday evening while two bodies were retrieved earlier in the day.

With this recovery, all the nine miners who had been trapped there on 6 January were found.

Dewatering operation in the mine at Umrangshu has been continuing for over one month and was completed on Wednesday to a level where retrieval operations could be launched. The highly decomposed corpses were spotted by the divers who went in and brought them out.

The bodies are yet to be identified and the process to do so has been initiated, the official said.

Nine workers were trapped inside the mine on 6 January and the body of one was recovered two days later while those of three others were found on 11 January.

Security and rescue personnel carry the body of one of the workers trapped inside a coal mine at Umrangso area amid the ongoing rescue operations, in Dima Hasao district, Assam *PHOTO: PTI*

An ex-gratia payment of Rs 10 lakh each has been paid by the government to the next of kin of the four miners whose bodies were recovered earlier and Rs 6 lakh each to the family of those trapped inside.

The government had announced that the families of all trapped inside the mine would be paid a total of Rs 10 lakh each.

The chief minister had earlier claimed that the mine was abandoned 12 years ago and was under the Assam Mineral Development Corporation till three years ago. *—PTI*

## Punjab does not have extra water to share, says CM

**CHANDIGARH, 20 FEB**

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann has declared that the state has no additional water to share with neighbouring states, asserting this during a meeting with the Ravi Beas Water Tribunal, which is addressing river water disputes involving Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan.

Mann highlighted that 76.5 per cent of Punjab's blocks are over-exploited with water extraction exceeding 100 per cent, while Haryana only faces 61.5 per cent over-exploitation. He emphasised the need for reassessment of water availability to protect the rights of future generations.

Mann also noted the historical context regarding water apportionment and underscored Punjab's commitment to optimising canal water usage, which has increased from 21 per cent to 84 per cent since he took office, positively impacting groundwater levels. *—PTI*

**SERVED 10-YEAR TERM**

# 'Serial rapist' rapes and kills 11-yr-old after HC acquittal

**BHOPAL, 20 FEB**

A serial-rape accused acquitted by the Madhya Pradesh High Court in 2018 raped an 11-year-old hearing-and-speech-impaired, mentally challenged girl in Rajgarh on the night of 1 and 2 February.

The girl died on 7 February at a government hospital in Bhopal after battling for life for four days.

He was acquitted four years after receiving a death sentence for abducting and raping an eight-year-old school girl.

The accused, a resident of Dabripura in Polaykala, raped a 5-year-old girl in Shajapur district's Mubarikpur village in 2003. He was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison. After serving the sentence, he was released in 2013.

In 2014, he kidnapped and raped an 8-year-old girl in Sehore. This time, the lower court sentenced him to death.

In 2018, the High Court overturned the verdict on technical grounds, stating that the victim's father was present during the identification parade, which could have influenced the results.

On the night of 1 February, the victim went missing from her home in Narsinghgarh. The next morning, her body was found in the bushes, bearing brutal injuries. The police launched an investigation.

CCTV footage from 136 cameras across 46 locations was examined. A suspect in a red shawl and blue-black sports shoes was spotted and was later identified as Ramesh.

Following his escape, police tracked him to Prayagraj, where went to attend Maha Kumbh. He was finally caught to Jaipur. *—Agencies*

## Amravati priest, accomplice held for raping minor

**MUMBAI, 20 FEB**

A 75-year-old priest from a mutt in Amravati district of Maharashtra and his associate have been arrested on charges of repeatedly raping a minor girl, making her pregnant, police said. A female relative of the 17-year-old has also been taken into custody.

The girl and her parents on Tuesday filed a complaint at Shirkhed police station against priest Surendramuni Talegaonkar and his associate Balasaheb Desai, 40. A medical examination revealed that the girl is eight months pregnant.

Police have registered a case against the accused and started an investigation. *—PTI*

# Calls for Shimla mosque demolition grow louder

**SHIMLA, 20 FEB**

Members of a civil society group and the Devbhoomi Sangharsh Samiti are demanding the demolition of a mosque in the Sanjauli locality, threatening a mass movement if their demands are not met within the next 15 days.

In December, the municipal commissioner had granted the Sanjauli mosque committee a three-month period to remove the unauthorised floors of the disputed five-storey mosque. The municipal body has also instructed the mosque committee and the Himachal Pradesh Waqf Board to submit a status report by March 15, after which the hearing regarding the remaining two floors will take place.

On Wednesday, a delegation from the Civil Society and the Sangharsh Samiti met with the Municipal Commissioner of Shimla, presenting a memorandum demanding action. They accused the authorities of inaction despite the earlier order to demolish the mosque. *—PTI*

**UNION PROTESTS SUSPENSION**

# Samsung urges TN govt to ensure 'ease of doing biz'

**CHENNAI, 20 FEB**

As a section of workers at Korean giant Samsung's Sriperumbudur plant near here intensified its protest against the company on Thursday, the latter said it has "zero-tolerance policy for any illegal activities" and urged authorities to "secure the safety of our workers, maintain discipline and provide ease of doing business."

A section of workers has been protesting against the suspension of three of their CITU-backed Samsung India Workers Union functionaries earlier and intensified their agitation on Thursday.

Responding, the company said "a certain section of workers once again illegally tried to disrupt operations and industrial peace today."

"It is important for all employees to adhere to company policies, and those who violate these policies will be subject to disciplinary action after due process. While our production remains uninterrupted, we urge the state authorities to secure the safety of our workers, maintain discipline and provide ease of doing business," the company said in a statement.

The union has launched a sit-in strike since 5 February, demanding reinstatement of the suspended workers. *—PTI*

A section of workers are protesting against the suspension of three CITU-backed Samsung India Workers Union functionaries *PHOTO: X*

# KIIT starts scholarship to honour Nepalese student

**BHUBANESWAR, 20 FEB**

The Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) in Odisha has announced a scholarship in memory of Prakriti Lamsal, the 20-year-old Nepalese student of the private engineering institute who died allegedly by suicide at her hostel room on 16 February, leading to unrest on the campus.

The announcement was made by KIIT and KISS founder Achyuta Samanta on Wednesday, who met the deceased student's father and uncle, offering his deepest condolences, according to a statement issued by the institute. "A scholarship would be instituted in Lamsal's name as a tribute to her memory," Samanta said.

Senior officials from Nepal's New Delhi Embassy also met students from their country on the campus on Wednesday, assuring them that similar incidents would not be repeated.

"KIIT has taken proactive measures to facilitate the return of those who are yet to return," the statement said.

Samanta also spoke to Nepal's Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba and Minister for Water Supply, Pradeep Yadav, assuring them that KIIT is committed to ensuring the safe return of all students. *—PTI*

We Will Not Be Silenced
WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED
WE NEED TRANSPARENT INVESTIGATION
ZERO TOLERANCE FOR HARASSMENT
JUSTICE FOR PRAKRITI
ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!!

Students protest at KIIT in Bhubaneshwar *PHOTO: PTI*

**CAUGHT IN RED-TAPE**

# *Pak man stuck in Mumbai police stn for 4mths*

**MUMBAI, 20 FEB**

A 65-year-old Pakistani man has been living at the Mata Ramabai Ambedkar (MRA) Marg police station in south Mumbai for the past four months, following his arrest for illegal entry into India. Nadir Munir Khan, a cloth merchant from Karachi, has been confined to a room at the station since being released from a six-month prison sentence on 11 October 2024.

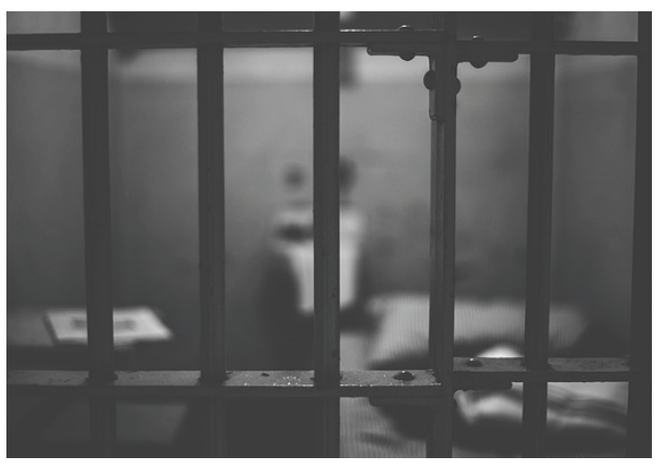
Khan was apprehended on 11 April 2024, after police discovered him behaving suspiciously near the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus. Lacking a visa or necessary documents, he was charged under the Foreigners Act and the Passport Act.

Upon his arrest, both the Intelligence Bureau and the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) interrogated him due to his nationality. Khan's circumstances arose from a business trip to Nepal in 2023, where he was cheated by local vendors who failed to pay for leather jackets.

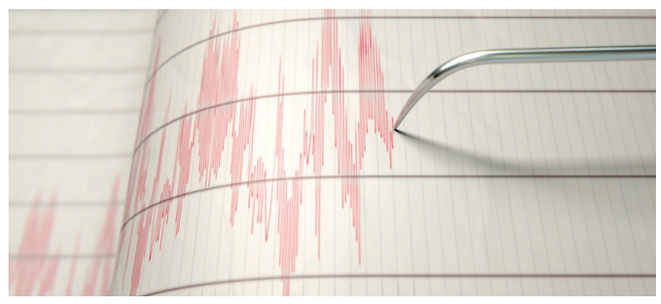
After confronting them, he was allegedly assaulted, resulting in the theft of his passport and other documents. He subsequently incurred fines for overstaying in Nepal before crossing into India through the Sonauli land port.

Authorities from the Mumbai police have reached out to Pakistan's government regarding his deportation, but until that process is finalised, Khan remains at the police station while being provided with food and basic necessities.

Inspector Santosh Dhanavate stated, "He is still the police station's responsibility while we await a response from the Pakistani authorities." *—PTI*



Mumbai police have reached out to Pakistan's government regarding Khan's deportation, but are yet to get a response *PHOTO: X*



The quake's epicentre was recorded at a latitude of 5.57°North and longitude of 95.07°East *PHOTO: X*

# 5.2 quake in Andaman Sea near Malaysia

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

A 5.2 magnitude earthquake shook the Andaman Sea near Malaysia, according to the National Centre of Seismology. The tremor was recorded at 8.49am at a depth of 75km.

The quake's epicentre was at a latitude of 5.57°N and longitude of 95.07°E. No casualties or damages have been reported.

A few days ago, Delhi-NCR recorded a 4.0 magnitude earthquake, sending tremors through the city. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) is actively monitoring the situation. *—Agencies*

UNE JOURNALISTE UKRAINIENNE EST MORTE EN PRISON EN RUSSIE. 19 Y SONT ENCORE ENFERMÉS.
FAUT-IL ATTENDRE LEUR MORT POUR AGIR ?
RSF
RSF

**DEATH BY SILENCE**

Mock coffins are laid out by members of RSF (Reporters Without Borders) during a protest against the imprisonment of Ukrainian journalists in Russia, on the Place de la Republique, in Paris, 20 February. The banner read " Ukrainian journalist dies in Russian prison. 19 are still imprisoned there. Should we wait for them to die before taking action?" ***PHOTO: PTI***

# Environment suffers amid Maha Kumbh rush

Nearly one-third of India's 1.4 billion plus population descended on the Maha Kumbh Mela. The number of people attending exceeded all expectations, according to the state government.

"The largest human religious festival in the world has already seen over 520 million arrive, averaging over 10 million every day," said Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary Manoj Kumar Singh, who oversaw earlier Kumbh preparations.

However, an event of this magnitude presents serious environmental challenges. The influx of millions of pilgrims strains local water resources and ecosystems, generates vast quantities of trash, including non-biodegradable materials, and increases pollution levels.

Concerns remain over the Ganga river's water quality and waste management during the 45-day spiritual and cultural festival.

India's Central Pollution Control Board earlier this month reported high levels of fecal coliform at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers at Prayagraj, indicating sewage contamination.

"We need to protect nature as otherwise there may not be any Ganga or Yamuna left by the time the next Kumbh happens," Swami Mukundananda, a spiritual leader of the Jagadguru Kripalu Yog Trust, which promotes societal development, told DW. "That is why we are reaching out to people to promote thought and awareness of waste, sanitation, environment, and hygiene management."

Chief Secretary Singh pointed out that faith-based organizations are trying to promote sustainable practices driven by their core values and a sense of responsibility towards environmental stewardship.

The Faith for Earth Initiative, launched by the UN Environment Program in 2017, strategically engages faith-based organizations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 agenda. Similarly, Ethiopia's Orthodox Tewahedo Church has helped preserve forests for centuries, protecting biodiversity.

With concerns over the Ganga and Yamuna, many believe spiritual leaders can spearhead environmental campaigns to conserve the ecosystems ***PHOTO: PTI***

"We are also trying to reconnect people with nature with the help of religious leaders. This is a beginning and more needs to be done," Singh said.

Chidanand Saraswati, president of the Parmarth Niketan Ashram, based in Rishikesh, said that spiritual leaders can promote devotion and responsibility toward nature by bridging ancient wisdom with modern sustainability."If faith leaders, society and the government can join hands, we can find a solution."

Many believe religious leaders can be powerful advocates for climate action within their communities through education and faith-based activism.

Human-induced climate change is already exacerbating extreme weather in India, including heat waves, flooding and other disasters.

Roxy Mathew Koll, a climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology in Pune, said these events threaten food, water, and energy security. "The entire region, not just India, is witnessing a clear trend in rising heat waves, floods, landslides, droughts, and cyclones," Koll told DW.

Chandra Bhushan, president and CEO of the International Forum for Environment, Sustainability and Technology, an independent research and innovation organization, said the scientific community and government officials realize their limited reach.

"Providing scientific information is not enough to reach people. They understand climate change and its effects if they can relate it to their lives, which science and government programs cannot do," Bhushan told DW.

He added that religious leaders can help bridge this gap, "to promote sustainable practices and advocate for policy changes."

In its 2022 report, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change painted a bleak picture for India, warning that it could face multiple climate change-induced disasters in the next two decades.

Religious leaders have committed to promoting eco-friendly practices among their followers. This includes adopting renewable energy, implementing waste management strategies, and enhancing climate education programs within faith communities. *—DW News*

## SALAR

# What will Arab nations' plan for Gaza look like?

According to the United Nations, around two-thirds of Gaza's buildings have been destroyed, and the territory's Health Ministry says more than 48,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel's military campaign.

With a fragile ceasefire currently in effect in Gaza, reconstruction of the enclave is being discussed.

Arab nations have been vehemently opposed to the Trump plan for Gaza. Jordan and Egypt, in particular, are concerned. The US president has suggested they could take in the around 2 million displaced Palestinians from Gaza, a move that would amount to an existential political and economic crisis for both countries.

Egypt, which was crucial to negotiating the Gaza ceasefire, has been leading a charge to come up with an alternative. A meeting has been arranged in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for the end of this week. Various ideas will be discussed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Most of the ideas have been suggested before, either over the past year or earlier. Later, an extraordinary Arab League summit is planned for 4 March in Cairo, where more countries are expected to discuss, then support, a draft plan for Gaza.

According to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the US is open to it. "If the Arab countries have a better plan, then that's great."

Saudi Arabia is likely to play an integral role in the alternative proposal as the Saudis are closer to the Trump administration and also have major financial ties to Trump family ventures. There have also been reports that the Arab plan will be called "the Trump plan" to ensure the US President's buy-in.

The plan will likely have three phases and take up to five years to complete.

The first phase involves immediate aid for displaced Palestinians. A number of "safe zones" would be established inside Gaza, equipped with mobile housing and other temporary shelters and ready access to aid and essential services.

Apparently 40 companies, many based in Egypt but some international, would be involved with reconstruction while Palestinians themselves will provide the labor.

A technocratic, Palestinian committee will be selected to manage the enclave. Who exactly would be on the committee remains unclear but it could include representatives of the Palestinian Authority, or PA, which runs things in the occupied West Bank, as well as leaders from local tribal groups or community mayors.

It is highly unlikely that the committee would include representatives of Hamas, which has been in charge of Gaza for the past two decades. Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by the US, the EU and others, has said it is willing to cede power but also wants to help choose committee members.

There are also arguments that neither Hamas nor the PA, which is often criticized for corruption and mismanagement, should be involved in the new administration. So it may be purely technocratic administration.

Security in Gaza could be provided by PA police or possibly by a multinational group, with potential support from Arab or even Western forces. The UAE has suggested creating a "temporary international mission" for security.

Last year, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggested that while a technocratic committee could govern in Gaza, Israel should still be responsible for security there. But Palestinians protest this would only amount to ongoing Israeli occupation.

An "Interim Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment" published by the World Bank this month indicates that $53.2 billion will be needed for Gaza's reconstruction over a decade, with $20 billion of that required over the next three years.

Arab nations may well end up paying part of that because their willingness to fund reconstruction is one of the factors that will make an Arab plan more palatable to Trump. But a Gulf-led fund, with financing from oil-rich nations like Qatar and the UAE, will also be dependent on a lasting ceasefire in Gaza and some kind of path towards a permanent end to violence, like a two-state solution. Otherwise, Gulf states have argued, there's no point in funding reconstruction if the area will only be bombed by Israel again. Again, to ensure US buy-in, there is speculation that the project may even be called "the Trump Fund for Reconstruction."

Israel however is unlikely to pay for Gaza's reconstruction. *—DW News*

With Israel unlikely to pay for Gaza reconstruction, Arab nations are working on a plan ***PHOTO: PTI***

**LETTERS** write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

# *In pushing for Ukraine elections, Trump is falling for Russian trap*

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was shut out of the discussions concerning the future of his country, which took place in Saudi Arabia on 18 February 2025. In fact, there were no Ukrainian representatives, nor any European Union ones – just US and Russian delegations, and their Saudi hosts.

The meeting – which followed a mutually complimentary phone call between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian leader Vladimir Putin just days earlier – was gleefully celebrated in Moscow. The absence of Ukraine in deciding its own future is very much in line with Putin's policy toward its neighbour. Putin has long rejected Ukrainian statehood and the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, or as he calls it the "Kyiv regime."

To that end, the US is increasingly falling in line with Moscow on a key plank of the Kremlin's plan to delegitimise Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian government: calling for elections in Ukraine as part of any peace deal.

Challenging Zelenskyy's legitimacy is part of a deliberate ongoing propaganda campaign by Russia to discredit Ukrainian leadership, weaken support for Ukraine from its key allies and remove Zelenskyy – and potentially Ukraine – as a partner in negotiations.

Yet the Kremlin is pushing the narrative that the problem is that there is no legitimate Ukrainian authority with which it can deal. As such, Putin can proclaim his commitments to a peace without making any compromises necessary to any true negotiation process.

Meanwhile, painting Zelenskyy as a "dictator" dampens the enthusiastic support that once greeted him from democratic countries. This, is turn, can translate to the reduction or even end of military support for Kyiv, Putin hopes, allowing him a fillip in what has become a war of attrition.

At the meeting in Saudi Arabia, the US reportedly discussed elections in Ukraine as being a key part of any peace deal. Trump himself has raised the prospect of elections, noting in a press conference, "We have a situation where we haven't had elections in Ukraine, "

The US president went on to claim, incorrectly, that Zelenskyy's approval rating was down to "4%." The latest polling actually shows the Ukrainian president to be sitting on a 57% approval rating.

Trump later upped the attacks, calling Zelenskyy a "dictator without elections."

Russia has been propagating the idea that Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a dictator ***PHOTOS: ANI/PTI***

Such statements echo Russia's narrative that the government in Kyiv is illegitimate.

The Kremlin's claims regarding what it describes as the "legal aspects related to Zelenskyy's legitimacy" are based on the premise that the Ukraine president's five-year term as president of Ukraine should have ended in 2024.

And elections in Ukraine would have taken place in May of that year had it not been for the martial law that Ukraine put into place when the Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Zelenskyy is not opposed to elections in principle and has agreed that elections should be held when the time is right. "Once martial law is over, then the ball is in parliament's court – the parliament then picks a date for elections," Zelenskyy said on 2 January.

And he appears to have the backing of the majority of Ukrainians. In May 2024, 69% of Ukrainians polled said Zelenskyy should remain president until the end of marshal law.

The issue, as Zelenskyy has said, is the timing and circumstances. "During the war, there can be no elections. It's necessary to change legislation, the constitution, and so on. But there are also nonlegal, very human challenges," he said.

Even opposition politicians in Ukraine agree that now is not the time. Petro Poroshenko, Zelenskyy's main political rival, has dismissed the idea of wartime elections, as has Inna Sovsun, the leader of the opposition Golos Party.

Apart from logistical problems of ensuring free and fair elections in the middle of a war, the conflict would present logistical hurdles to campaigning and accessing polling sites. There is also the question of whether and how to include Ukrainians in Russian-occupied territories and those who are internally displaced, as well as the 6.5 million who fled fighting and currently reside abroad.

There are other reasons Ukraine might be wary of elections. The adversarial nature of political campaigns can be divisive. Ukrainian politicians have openly argued that holding an election would be undermine Ukrainian unity.

And then there is concern over outside influence in any election.

Russia has since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 employed its substantial resources to influence Ukraine's politics through all available means.

In 2004, Moscow's electoral manipulations in favor of the pro-Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, led to the Orange Revolution where Ukrainians rose up to reject rigged elections.

Nine years later, Yanukovich, who became president in 2010 was deposed though the Revolution of Dignity, which saw Ukrainians oust a man many saw as a Russian stooge in favor of a path toward greater integration with Europe.

Putin's history of meddling in elections extends beyond Ukraine. Most recently, the Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the country's presidential elections, citing an electoral process compromised by foreign interference.

In short, in echoing Russian talking points, the US puts the Ukrainian government in an impossible position: Agree to the vote and risk division and interference, or reject it and allow Moscow and perhaps Washington to frame Ukraine's leaders as illegitimate and unable to negotiate on the behalf of their people. *—PTI*

## Teenager detained in Czech Republic for killing 2 women

**PRAGUE, 20 FEB**

Two women have died in a knife attack on Thursday at a shopping centre in the Czech Republic, officials said. Police say they detained a teenage suspect in connection with the stabbings in a store in the city of Hradec Kralove, some 100 east of Prague. Reports initially said the victims had been injured, one of them seriously, but police later said both had died. They were not identified. A 16-year-old Czech national was detained by police about one 1 km from the scene, shortly after the attack. A knife was found nearby. Prime Minister Petr Fiala offered his condolences to the relatives of the dead. The motive for the attack was not immediately known. Police say the situation was under control and there was no danger to the public. *—PTI*

## Yoon appears in 2 courts to face trial over martial law

**SEOUL, 20 FEB**

Travelling around Seoul in a prison transport vehicle, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol appeared in two different courts on Thursday, contesting his arrest on rebellion charges in one and fighting an effort to remove him from office in the other. Both cases – one on criminal charges and one an impeachment – are related to his brief imposition of martial law in December, 2024. Security was heightened at the Seoul Central District Court as the motorcade transporting Yoon arrived for a preliminary hearing that involved discussions of witnesses, proposed evidence and other preparations for his criminal trial. Yoon next travelled across the capital to the Constitutional Court, which is nearing a decision on whether to formally remove him from office after was impeached by the National Assembly. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

## Pioneer of African cinema, Cisse dies aged 84

**BAMAKO, 20 FEB**

Mali's highly acclaimed director Souleymane Cisse, who is considered one of the pillars of African cinema, has died at age 84. His daughter announced that Cisse died on Wednesday, leaving a trailblazing legacy on the silver screen spanning half a century that was marked by a commitment to African storytelling, deep humanism and profound political engagement. "Papa died today in Bamako. He dedicated all his life to his country, to cinema and to art," Mariam said. Cisse won the jury's prize at the 1987 Cannes for 'Yeelen', which draws on legends from west Africa's Bambara people. In 2023, Cannes honoured him again with the Carrosse d'Or, an award given to directors who have "marked the history of cinema with their boldness". *—Agencies*

## Singapore stalls campus meals programme

**SINGAPORE, 20 FEB**

Singapore on Thursday halted a national preparedness initiative which involves ready-to-eat meals, following cases of food poisoning at the School of the Arts (SOTA) arising from the meals. In a joint statement, the Singapore Food Agency, Ministry of Education, Agency for Integrated Care and food caterer SATS, said they "will pause the Food Resilience Preparedness Programme as until investigations on the SOTA gastroenteritis cases are concluded". Channel News Asia first reported about the gastroenteritis cluster at SOTA on Wednesday, believed to be linked with food given at the campus. A total of 20 students developed diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting after consuming the meals. *—PTI*

# Musk supports Trump's call for polls in battle-ravaged Ukraine

### US Prez had called Zelenskyy a 'dictator' and aligned with Russia's narrative on war

**WASHINGTON DC, 20 FEB**

Amid the straining ties between US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy over the delay of presidential elections in war-torn Ukraine, Elon Musk also voiced his support for holding the polls.

Musk responded to a post highlighting US elections during the Civil War and World War II, stating that Zelenskyy cannot claim to represent the Ukrainian people without holding elections.

"Zelensky cannot claim to represent the will of the people of Ukraine unless he restores freedom of the press and stops cancelling elections!" said Musk.

> **Left-leaning media is trying to drive us (Trump) apart. Trump has been unfairly attacked in the media**
>
> —Elon Musk, US billionaire

It is important to note that Ukrainian law does not mandate elections during wartime.

Donald Trump has not only turned against Volodymyr Zelenskyy, calling the Ukrainian president a "dictator," but has also aligned himself with Russia's narrative regarding its invasion, raising concerns about Ukraine's future, as reported by AFP.

"I think the Russians want to see the war end... But I think they have the cards a little bit because they've taken a lot of territory, so they have the cards," Trump told reporters on Wednesday, AFP reported.Trump has accused Ukrainian president, of undermining democracy and blaming him for the war. *—Agencies*

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Elon Musk and Donald Trump PHOTO: X

## IRS to lay off 7,000 workers

The IRS will lay off 7,000 workers in Washington and around the country beginning on Thursday, a person familiar with the plans told AP. The layoffs will affect probationary employees with one year or less service at the agency. *—PTI*

## Trump stops aid to immigrants

President Trump has signed an order to end federal benefits to illegal immigrants, his latest in a blizzard of moves to crack down on immigration, the White House said on Wednesday. It was not clear which benefits will be targeted. *—PTI*

## Rubio ends trip with UAE visit

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio met UAE leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan on Wednesday, ending a trip that saw the highest-level outreach between the US and Russia since Ukraine invasion began in 2022. *—PTI*

## INDIAN DEPORTEES REACH PANAMA

**PANAMA CITY, 20 FEB**

Panama has informed India about the safe arrival of a group of Indians deported from the US and the Indian mission in the country is working closely with the host government to ensure their wellbeing after obtaining consular access.

The Embassy of India in Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua on Thursday shared the information on X but did not provide data on the number of deportees.

They arrived in the country last week after President Jose Raul Mulino agreed that Panama would become a "bridge" country for deportees. *—PTI*

## US cuts funding for PA forces

Trump administration has stopped all funding for the Palestinian Authority's (PA) security forces as part of its recent aid cuts. Trump's first administration had stopped all direct aid to the PA except for funding for training and reform for the security forces. *—Agencies*

## DOGE savings for citizens

President Trump on Wednesday said he would like to give 20 per cent of the savings from the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) back to US citizens as dividend and use another 20 per cent to pay the national debt. *—PTI*

## Boeing delay irks Trump

President Donald Trump said on Wednesday he is considering buying used Boeing aircraft to use as Air Force One when he is aboard, as he fumed over US plane-maker Boeing's delays in producing two specially modified ones for presidential use. *—PTI*

قتلهم مجرم الحرب نتنياهو وجيشه النازي
بصواريخ الطائرات الحربية الصهيونية
רצח אותם בושע המלחמה נתנייהו
בטלי המטוסים הקרביים
The War Criminal Netanyahu & His
Nazi Army Killed Them with Missiles
from Zionist Warplan

The militants displayed four black coffins on a stage with a banner depicting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a vampire PHOTO: X

# Hamas returns bodies of four Israeli hostages

**GAZA STRIP, 20 FEB**

Hamas on Thursday released the bodies of four Israeli hostages, said to include a mother and her two children who have long been feared dead and had come to embody the nation's agony following the 7 October, 2023, attack.

The remains were said to be of Shiri Bibas and her two children Ariel and Kfir, as well as Oded Lifshitz who was 83 when he was abducted. Kfir, who was nine months old when he was taken, was the youngest captive. Hamas has said all four were killed along with their guards in Israeli airstrikes.

The militants displayed four black coffins on a stage in the Gaza Strip surrounded by banners, including a large one depicting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a vampire. The fighters then carried the coffins over to Red Cross vehicles, where staffers in red vests covered them in white sheets before placing them inside.

- The remains were said to be of Shiri Bibas and her two children Ariel and Kfir, as well as Oded Lifshitz who was 83 when he was abducted. Kfir, who was nine months old when he was taken, was the youngest captive

The Red Cross convoy headed back to Israel, where authorities will carry out the formal identification of the remains using DNA samples, which is expected to take up to two days. Only then will the families be given the final notification.

The Israeli military confirmed it had received the coffins.

Thousands of people, including large numbers of armed fighters from Hamas and other factions, gathered at the handover site on the outskirts of the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis. *—PTI*

**BIAS AGAINST WHITE MINORITY**

# US to stay away from G20 meet in SA

**JOHANNESBURG, 20 FEB**

A meeting of foreign ministers from G20 countries will get underway in Johannesburg on Thursday, but US Secretary of State Marco Rubio will not attend amid diplomatic tensions between South Africa and the US.

Diplomats including Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi are expected to attend the gathering, while the US will be represented by acting ambassador to South Africa Dana Brown.

The European Union, the United Nations and the African Union, which is part of the G20, will also be in attendance.

Rubio snubbed the meeting after an executive order by US President Donald Trump stopped foreign aid to the country over a law that the White House said amounts to discrimination against the country's white minority. The US is also displeased with South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

South African Foreign Minister Ronald Lamola said Rubio's decision was "not a complete boycott of South Africa's G20." He said the US would be represented in Johannesburg this week "in one form or another".

US Secretary of Treasury Scott Bessent has also confirmed he will not attend a meeting of G20 finance ministers scheduled to take place in South Africa next week.

Analysts say that Rubio and Bessent's absence signalled the US was pulling back from the G20 and demonstrated how strained the relations are. *—PTI*

## Pak marks 1 year of X ban amid free speech curbs

**LAHORE, 20 FEB**

The Pakistan government's ban on social media platform X has completed one year this month, with au-thorities showing no signs of reversing the decision despite growing criticism.

"The Shehbaz Sharif government has no plans to lift the ban in the near future because of rising criticism of his government and the military on social media," a senior leader of the ruling party Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) told PTI on Thursday.

The PML-N leader from Punjab, who doesn't want to be named, said the ban on social media platform X would remain in place until the government finds a way to counter the online criticism led by Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, which has been targeting key figures, including the army chief, on social media.

X was blocked in Pakistan in the third week of February 2024, shortly after the general elections held on February 8. *—PTI*

# China airlifts citizens rescued from scam centres in Myanmar

**BANGKOK, 20 FEB**

An airlift carrying more than 1,000 Chinese nationals rescued from online scam centres in eastern Myanmar began Thursday, after they were taken across the border to Thailand.

Thailand, China and Myanmar have coordinated efforts over the past month to shut down the scam centres that bilked victims around the world out of billions of dollars through false romantic ploys, bogus investment pitches and illegal gambling schemes.

Hundreds of thousands of people from Southeast Asia and elsewhere are estimated to have worked at such centres in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, with many who were recruited under false pretenses for other jobs found themselves trapped in virtual slavery. Thai officials said recently that as many as 10,000 such people may be repatriated from Myanmar. *—PTI*

Hundreds of thousands of people from Southeast Asia are estimated to have worked at such centres in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos PHOTO: X

## Pope recovering from pneumonia, says Vatican

**ROME, 20 FEB**

Pope Francis is continuing his recovery from pneumonia, eating breakfast out of bed on Thursday morning after a sixth peaceful night at the hospital, Vatican said after confirming late Wednesday that new blood tests showed a "slight improvement" in some inflammation indices for the 88-year-old pontiff.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, who visited the Pope on Wednesday, said was in good spirits and "joked around as always." *—PTI*

**FOCUS ON BORDER FENCING**

# *'Reports on B'desh minorities exaggerated'*

**DHAKA, 20 FEB**

The chief of Bangladesh's border guarding force on Thursday termed the reports of attacks on minorities in his country as "exaggerated", asserting that authorities have taken steps for their protection.

Addressing a joint press conference along with chief of India's Border Security Force (BSF) Daljit Singh Chaudhary, Director General of the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) Major General Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui said the Bangladeshi delegation has raised objection with regard to fencing at some places along the Indo-Bangladesh border and it was hopeful that the issues would be resolved in the future.

Chaudhary said infiltration along the international border has come down substantially after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government on 5 August, 2024.

On the issue of minorities, Siddiqui said, "Attacks on minorities in Bangladesh are exaggerated. We got several requests from minorities as they were afraid but BGB convinced them that we will help." The BGB chief said fencing was discussed at length at their bi-annual meeting with the BSF as it was the most focussed agenda. "We have requested for joint inspection wherever there are issues," he said.

Siddiqui also said there was no discussion on reworking

Officials of India's Border Security Force and the Border Guard Bangladesh take part in the 55th edition of the bi-annual DG-level border talks on Thursday PHOTO: X / @BSF_INDIA

# China holds NBC drills using UAVs, robots

**BEIJING, 20 FEB**

The Chinese military has conducted nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) drills using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), robotic dogs and explosive ordnance disposal robots, official media reported in the national capital on Thursday.

The People's Liberation Army's 73rd Group Army recently carried out the NBC defence and emergency rescue exercise at its comprehensive training ground.

The drill featured the deployment of UAVs, robotic dogs and explosive ordnance disposal robots, state-run CCTV reported on Thursday without disclosing the location for the drills.

The brigade fully explored training methods integrating technology and networked systems, and combined simulation and practical exercises in creating a multi-role intelligent training field, a report in the state-run Global Times said.

"Be it the advancement of simulation training or the wide deployment of unmanned equipment, both create new competitive avenues for us," Qi Huali, a member of the brigade, told official media.

"Simulation training enhances the coordination among various combat elements, and we have improved and optimised the integration of manned and unmanned tactics and then applied the best combat strategies to exercises for validation," Qi said.

Song Zhongping, a Chinese military expert, told the Global Times that unmanned equipment is increasingly being utilised, including supportive missions shown in the drills. *—PTI*

## Rupee rises 33p to close at 86.65 against USD

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

The rupee appreciated 33 paise to close at 86.65 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, supported by the weakening of the American currency in the overseas market. Forex traders said there is a negative bias for the USD/INR pair amid a muted trend in domestic equities and the unabated foreign fund outflow is weighing on investor sentiments. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.88 and touched the high of 86.58 and a low of 86.88 against the greenback during intraday. It ended the session at 86.65 (provisional) against the dollar, logging a gain of 33 paise from previous close. On Tuesday, the rupee depreciated 10 paise to close at 86.98 against US dollar. The forex market was closed on Wednesday on account of 'Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Jayanti'. *—PTI*

## Gold hits ₹89,450/10g, silver rallies ₹700

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

Gold prices hit a fresh high of Rs 89,450 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday, advancing Rs 50 amid firm global trends, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity had settled at Rs 89,400 per 10 grams on Wednesday. Gold of 99.5 per cent purity went up Rs 50 to establish a record of Rs 89,050 per 10 grams. "Gold hit fresh record highs on Thursday as the news flow regarding Trump's tariff policy continues to attract safe haven flow towards gold and also to prevent investors from profit-taking in gold," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst -- Commodities at HDFC Securities, said. US President Trump stated that he would impose tariffs on timber, vehicles, semiconductors, and pharmaceuticals over the next month. *—PTI*

## PNB slashes retail loans rates by 25 bps

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

State-owned Punjab National Bank (PNB) on Thursday announced reduction in interest rates by up to 25 basis points on retail loans, including housing and auto loans, following the RBI rate cut. The revised rates apply to a wide range of products, including home loans, car loans, education and personal loans, ensuring that customers continue to receive diverse financing options, PNB said in a statement. After a gap of five years, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) reduced the repo rate, the rate at which banks borrow from the central bank, by 25 basis points to 6.25 per cent on February 7. Following the rate cut, PNB has revised the home loan rate to 8.15 per cent under various schemes. Customers can benefit from a complete waiver of upfront processing fees and documentation charges till March 31, 2025, it said. *—PTI*

## WhatsApp banned 8.4B accounts in Aug 2024

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

WhatsApp has taken swift action against over 8.4 million accounts, in India banning them in just one month. This move comes from Meta, the parent company of WhatsApp, in response to rising concerns about the misuse of the platform for fraudulent activities. According to the company, the decision to ban these accounts was driven by reports of scams and suspicious activities, prompting numerous users to report such fraudulent behavior. The report from Meta reveals that the bans occurred between 1-31 August. 1.66 million were immediately blocked due to serious violations, while the remaining were banned after investigations determined them to be suspicious. 1.6 million accounts were banned during monitoring, without any user complaints, as they were identified to be engaged in misuse.*—PTI*

# Vedanta demerger gets green signal

### 99.99% of shareholders back firm's split into 5 entities

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

Vedanta Ltd announced on Thursday that shareholders and lenders have overwhelmingly approved a plan to split the metals and oil conglomerate into five independent, sector-focused companies. The company revealed that 99.99 per cent of the shareholders voted in favour of the demerger scheme, alongside 99.59 per cent of secured creditors and 99.95 per cent of unsecured creditors.

Mining tycoon Anil Agarwal initiated the restructuring plan in 2023 following a failed attempt to take Vedanta private in 2020. The split will create five distinct entities: Vedanta Ltd, which will focus on base metals; Vedanta Aluminium, a leading global aluminium producer; Vedanta Oil & Gas, India's largest private sector crude oil producer; Vedanta Power, one of India's largest power generators; and Vedanta Iron and Steel, noted for its scalable ferrous portfolio.

Once the demerger process is complete, each existing shareholder will receive one additional share in each of the newly formed companies. The proposal highlights that the demerger will enhance operational focus and efficiency while attracting diverse investors and partners for the independent entities.

With 324.58 crore or 83 per cent of the 391.03 crore shares voting on the scheme, almost all polled shares, barring a few, were in favour. The demerger aims to facilitate sharper capital market access, thereby unlocking the value of the individual companies.

The finalisation of the demerger will depend on various statutory, governmental, and regulatory approvals, including those from the National Company Law Tribunal. Presently, Vedanta Ltd maintains a diversified portfolio encompassing interests in metals, mining, oil and gas, power generation, and emerging sectors. *—PTI*

HDFC BANK, MARUTI ARE LAGGARDS

# Markets fall for 3rd day amid uncertainty over US tariffs

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

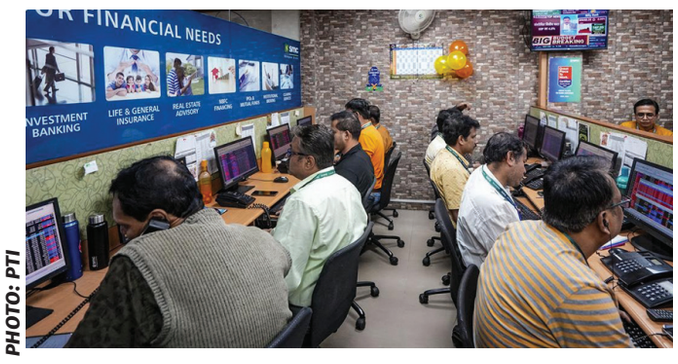


PHOTO: PTI

Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty declined for the third day on Thursday as fresh tariff threats, weak Asian markets and foreign fund outflows hurt investors' sentiment.

The 30-share BSE Sensex dropped 203.22 points or 0.27 per cent to settle at 75,735.96. During the day, it tanked 476.17 points or 0.62 per cent to 75,463.01.

The NSE Nifty dipped 19.75 points or 0.09 per cent to 22,913.15. Selling in frontline stocks HDFC Bank and ICICI Bank also dragged down the key indices.

From the Sensex pack, HDFC Bank, Maruti, Tech Mahindra, HCL Tech, ITC, ICICI Bank, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Bajaj Finance were among the biggest laggards.

NTPC, Adani Ports, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Steel and IndusInd Bank were among the gainers.Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,881.30 crore on Wednesday after a day's breather, according to exchange data.

"Domestic equity indices experienced minor losses as rising concerns over potential US tariffs on Indian goods led to capital outflows.

- 30-share BSE Sensex dropped 203.22 points or 0.27 per cent to settle at 75,735.96. During the day, it tanked 476.17 points or 0.62 per cent to 75,463.01

Additionally, the proposed trade policy is expected to exert inflationary pressures, with the latest Fed Minutes indicating that an interest rate cut may be delayed," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the negative territory.European markets were trading mostly higher.

US markets ended in positive territory on Wednesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude went up 0.08 per cent to USD 76.10 a barrel.

Sensex dipped 28.21 points or 0.04 per cent to settle at 75,939.18 on Wednesday. Meanwhile the Nifty skidded 12.40 points to 22,932.90. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

## Auto sector pins hope on marriage season: Report

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

The Indian auto sector is looking to the upcoming marriage season and the revival of government infrastructure projects as crucial factors for boosting sales, particularly in two-wheelers and entry-level cars, according to a report by InCred Research.

The report highlights that the demand for automobiles has faced hurdles following the festive season, with discounts being phased out gradually. Industry stakeholders are watching two key indicators—price hikes and overall demand trends—to gauge future prospects. It notes, "Rural demand growth outpaced urban demand by 200-300 basis points for the quarter, with hopes resting on the marriage season and a revival in government infrastructure projects."

This suggests that rural consumers are exhibiting more interest in vehicle purchases. Weddings in India drive up vehicle purchases, both as gifts and for personal use, making this period vital for automakers. The revival of government projects could also stimulate income growth in rural areas, further supporting automobile sales. Easing interest rates and recent income-tax cuts have enhanced disposable incomes. While international demand outperformed expectations for original equipment manufacturers the auto components sector has reported weaker demand in the third quarter of FY25. Overall, despite challenges, the combination of favourable conditions may well herald a recovery in the auto sector in the coming months *—ANI*

CHARGES FROM 1%- 0.5%

# GPay to charge extra fees on bill payments via credit, debit cards

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

PHOTO: X

Google Pay ecosystem, has begun charging convenience fees on utility bill payments, including electricity and cooking gas bills.

Previously free for small transactions, these payments now attract charges ranging from 0.5 per cent to 1 per cent plus GST when made using credit or debit cards.

This move signals a significant shift towards monetizing UPI transactions as fintech firms seek sustainable revenue streams.

This development follows Google Pay's introduction of a Rs 3 convenience fee on mobile recharges over a year ago. A recent analysis by The Economic Times (ET) found that a user was charged approximately Rs 15 as a "convenience fee" while paying an electricity bill via credit card. The fee, which included GST, was categorized as a "processing fee for debit and credit card transactions."

Currently, Google Pay handles nearly 37 per cent of UPI transactions, second only to Walmart-backed PhonePe. In January 2025 alone, the platform processed UPI transactions worth Rs 8.26 lakh crore.

Google Pay levies convenience fees on payments made via cards, while UPI transactions linked directly to bank accounts remain free.

PhonePe imposes similar fees on certain bill payments made through cards. Paytm charges platform fees ranging from Rs 1 to Rs 40 on UPI recharges and various utility bill payments, including gas, water, and credit card bills.

To encourage digital payments, the Indian government has waived Merchant Discount Rate (MDR)fees for UPI transactions below Rs 2,000 since 2020. *—Agencies*

## Minister launches digital licence for pilots

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Civil Aviation Minister K Rammohan Naidu unveiled the Electronic Personnel Licence (EPL) for pilots on Thursday, marking a vital advancement in the modernisation and safety of civil aviation in India. With this launch, India becomes the second nation globally to implement EPL for flight crew, following China. The minister introduced the EPL at UDAAN Bhawan, emphasising the initiative's alignment with the government's goals for Ease of Doing Business and the Digital India initiative. The rollout of the EPL reinforces India's status as a frontrunner in aviation innovation. This development not only meets the needs of India's aviation sector but also sets a benchmark for other countries to emulate. The EPL initiative aligns with the International Civil Aviation Organisation's (ICAO) roadmap for modern aviation governance, showcasing India's readiness to embrace future advancements. Civil Aviation Secretary Vumlunmang Vualnam and Director-General of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, Faiz Ahmed Kidwai, also attended the launch, highlighting the collaborative effort behind this significant milestone for the aviation industry. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

## AI expands codeshare with Lufthansa Group

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

Air India has announced a significant expansion of its codeshare agreement with the Lufthansa Group, facilitating an increase of 60 routes across 12 cities in India and 26 cities in Europe. The new agreement includes Austrian Airlines and enhances existing partnerships with Lufthansa and Swiss International Air Lines (SWISS).

The Tata Group-owned airline will now provide customers access to 26 European destinations and three locations in the Americas, enabling travel beyond its main gateways in Europe, namely Frankfurt, Vienna, and Zurich. The number of codeshare routes between Air India, Lufthansa, and SWISS will rise from 55 to almost 100. *—PTI*

## India to assemble iPhone 16e for local sale

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Apple's new iPhone series, iPhone 16e, is being assembled in India for domestic sales as well as export to select countries, the company said on Thursday.

The company has launched iPhone 16e at a lower price range, compared to iPhone 16 series, which will start selling in India from 28 February onwards.

"The entire iPhone 16 lineup, including iPhone 16e, is being assembled in India for Indian consumers and for export to select countries," Apple said in a response to a query on Thursday.

The device comes with A18 chip, Apple Intelligence, and 48MP Fusion camera with an integrated 2x Telephoto lens. The phone also supports satellite communication for Emergency SOS, Roadside Assistance, Messages etc. Meanwhile, the company removed iPhone 14, iPhone 14 Plus, and the third-generation iPhone SE from its official online store after the announcement of iPhone 16e.

While Apple has removed the above-mentioned devices from its Apple India online store, the devices may still be available on other e-commerce platforms. *—Agencies*

- The company removed iPhone 14, iPhone 14 Plus, and the third-generation iPhone SE from its official online store after the announcement of iPhone 16e

## Auto component firms to invest ₹30K cr next fiscal

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Major auto component firms in India are predicted to invest between ₹25,000 crore and Rs 30,000 crore in the next fiscal year for capacity expansion and localisation, including electric vehicle (EV) parts, according to a report by ratings agency ICRA.

Vinutaa S, Vice President and Sector Head at ICRA Ltd, indicated that the sector is expected to expend Rs 15,000 crore to Rs 20,000 crore in FY2025 and an additional Rs 25,000 crore to Rs 30,000 crore in FY2026. These incremental investments will focus on new product development, advancements in technology, and compliance with emerging regulatory standards.

The report forecasts that revenue growth for the Indian auto component industry is likely to moderate to 7-9 per cent in the current fiscal and 8-10 per cent in FY2026, down from 14 per cent in FY2024. Demand from domestic Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs), which represent over half of industry revenues, is expected to grow similarly. *—ANI*

AMID US BRIBERY CHARGE

# *Adani portfolio maintains double-digit growth*

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Adani Portfolio, India's largest infrastructure group with businesses in cement and mining, has continued its strong double-digit growth despite external challenges.

For the twelve-month period ending December 2024, EBITDA reached Rs 86,789 crore, marking a 10.1 per cent year-on-year growth. Adjusted for prior income, the growth stands at 21.3 per cent. In the December quarter alone, EBITDA rose 17.2 per cent to Rs 22,823 crore, a company statement said.

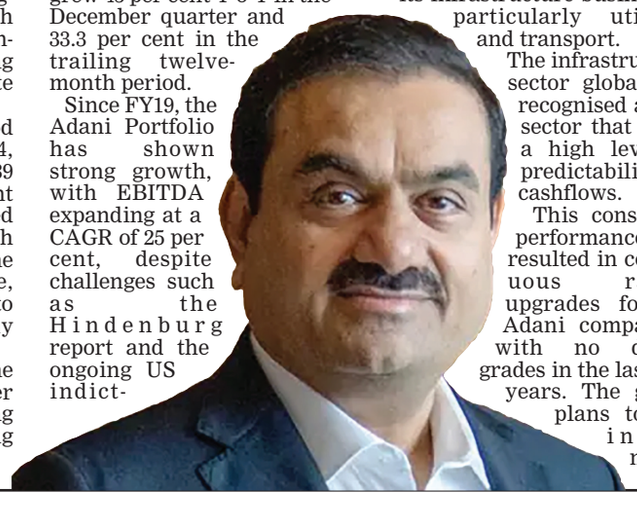
A key to this growth is the emerging businesses under Adani Enterprises, including solar and wind manufacturing and airports.

These businesses, part of AEL's infrastructure division, grew 45 per cent Y-o-Y in the December quarter and 33.3 per cent in the trailing twelve-month period.

Since FY19, the Adani Portfolio has shown strong growth, with EBITDA expanding at a CAGR of 25 per cent, despite challenges such as the Hindenburg report and the ongoing US indictment. Around 85 per cent of the group's profits come from its infrastructure businesses, particularly utilities and transport.

The infrastructure sector globally is recognised as the sector that lends a high level of predictability for cashflows.

This consistent performance has resulted in continuous rating upgrades for all Adani companies, with no downgrades in the last five years. The group plans to use incremental cashflows from these profits as major drivers for capital expenditure in the years ahead. *—PTI*



- For the twelve-month period ending December 2024, EBITDA reached Rs 86,789 crore, marking a 10.1 per cent year-on-year growth. Adjusted for prior income, the growth stands at 21.3 per cent. In the December quarter alone, EBITDA rose 17.2 per cent to Rs 22,823 crore, a company statement said

## Hilton, NILE to launch 75 Hampton hotels in India

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Global hospitality leader Hilton has announced a strategic licensing agreement with NILE Hospitality to establish 75 'Hampton by Hilton' hotels in India, marking a significant step in its expansion strategy in the country. The initial hotels are expected to open in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, and Bihar; however, no specific timeline has been provided.

The Hampton by Hilton brand operates in the upper-midscale segment, enhancing Hilton's existing midscale offerings within India, which also include the upscale Hilton Garden Inn and the forthcoming premium economy brand, Spark by Hilton. Alan Watts, President of Hilton Asia Pacific, stated that this expansion coincides with India's strong macroeconomic growth, a burgeoning middle class, and extensive infrastructure development, which collectively drive demand for Hilton's offerings.

Hilton currently operates over 3,000 Hampton by Hilton hotels in 43 countries worldwide. Last year, the chain also announced plans to introduce 150 'Spark by Hilton' hotels in India through a partnership with Olive by Embassy. *—ANI*

## Wild cards for Dhamne, Prajwal in Bengaluru Open

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

India's 17-year-old prodigy Manas Dhamne and seasoned campaigners Ramkumar Ramanathan and SD Prajwal Dev have been handed wild card entries for the singles main draw of the Bengaluru Open ATP Challenger 125 tournament, starting here on 24 February. Kriish Tyagi and Niki Kaliyanda Poonacha will compete in the qualifying rounds as wild cards, looking to secure a spot in the main draw. Dhamne, one of India's most promising young talents, has been active on the circuit for two years and recently captured his first significant title at the M15 Monastir in Tunisia. Prajwal Dev and Ramanathan, meanwhile, bring decades of experience to the tournament. Manas Dhamne's rapid progress is exciting for Indian tennis, while Ramkumar and Prajwal Dev bring valuable experience to the field. We look forward to seeing how all our wild card entrants perform in the competition.—*PTI*

PHOTO: X

## Lewis Hamilton confident of Ferrari glory

**PARIS, 20 FEB**

Lewis Hamilton is convinced that this season could be Ferrari's year after he drove for the first time on Wednesday the Formula One team's car for the upcoming season, with a record eighth world title in his sights. Hamilton delighted hopeful fans by putting the new SF-25 car through its paces at Ferrari's track in Fiorano Modenese in northern Italy before stopping to salute spectators who are hoping he can end the Italian team's long world championship drought. Ferrari hasn't won the constructors title since 2008 and Kimi Raikkonen was the last man to claim the driver's title with them the year before but asked whether he thought the 'Scuderia' were ready to win the world championship, Hamilton simply said "Yes". "I've worked with two world championship winning teams before, I know what a winning team looks and feels like," Hamilton told reporters.—*PTI*

## FIH Pro League: India eye consistency

**BHUBANESWAR, 20 FEB**

From inconsistent performances to a poor rate of penalty corner conversion, India men's hockey team captain Harmanpreet Singh has plenty to worry about when his team takes on Ireland in the FIH Pro League here on Friday. Having ended 2024 on a high following their Paris Olympics bronze-winning show and a bagful of accolades at the FIH annual awards, the Indians are finding it difficult to gather momentum and perform consistently in the ongoing league. The hosts opened the tournament with a 1-3 defeat to Spain, bounced back with a 2-0 win against them last weekend.—*PTI*

## Satwiksairaj loses father to cardiac arrest

**NEW DELHI, 20 FEB**

Asian Games champion shuttler Satwiksairaj Rankireddy's father R Kasi Viswanatham died of cardiac arrest on Thursday morning. Satwik, currently in the national capital for the 43rd PSPB Inter-Unit badminton tournament, was scheduled to receive the prestigious Khel Ratna award on Thursday. His father, a retired physical education teacher, was set to travel to join him for the ceremony but tragically passed away before he could make the trip. "It is extremely sad and unfortunate that Satwik has lost his father this morning," said a source close to the family.The 24-year-old from Amalapuram will depart for Andhra Pradesh this afternoon to be with his family. —*PTI*

# Gill, Shami shine as India beat B'desh

## Towhid Hridoy made a courageous maiden ODI hundred

**DUBAI, 20 FEB**

Shubman Gill was more artisan than artist en route to his eighth ODI hundred after Mohammed Shami's satisfying five-wicket haul, propelling India to a workmanlike six-wicket win over Bangladesh in their Champions Trophy opener here on Thursday.

Gill's unbeaten innings (101, 129b, 9x4. 2x6) had a mirror image of Bangladesh's innings through Towhid Hridoy's 100 (118b) that lifted them to 228 from the depths of 35 for five after batting by choice.

But India negated various pressure points, including a sluggish surface, during their chase effectively through Gill's knock full of substance, and ended up at 231 for four in 46.3 overs.

It's also a nerve-settling victory for India ahead of their much-awaited clash against a more accomplished Pakistan at the same venue on February 23. Gill, the world's No. 1 ODI batter, played a massive role in it, dishing out a century that was more remarkable for its restraint than the customary flair.

It was also a reflection of his growing stature as India's new-generation batting star.

Chasing a modest 229, openers Rohit Sharma (41, 36b) and Gill gave India a rollicking start. The partnership was significant from a game point of view as the pitch slowed down considerably in the middle overs, making batting a tad tougher task.

Virat Kohli looked a bit over-watchful and circumspect before opening his account after facing 10 balls.

Though he grew comfortable, an uppish cut of leg-spinner Rishad Hossain ended his stay for 22. But KL Rahul, who was dropped on nine by Jaker Ali off Taskin, ensured that there were no further hiccups and played a resolute unbeaten innings of 41 off 47 balls.

Gill and Rahul added 87 runs for the unbroken fifth-wicket alliance to carry their side home.

Earlier, a cramping Hridoy, who made a courageous maiden ODI hundred and an equally gutsy Ali (68, 114b, 4x4) added 154 for a doughty sixth-wicket stand to give some respectability to Bangladesh's total.

Cramping Towhid Hridoy made a courageous maiden ODI hundred but led by five-wicket man Mohammed Shami India managed to keep Bangladesh to an underwhelming 228 in their Champions Trophy opener here on Thursday.

Hridoy (100, 118b, 6x4, 2x6) and an equally gutsy Jaker Ali (68, 114b, 4x4) added 154 for a doughty sixth-wicket stand to drag Bangladesh back from the depth of 35 for five after they elected to bat.

India 231 for 4 (Gill 101*, Rahul 41*, Rishad 2-38) beat Bangladesh 228 (Hridoy 100, Jaker 68, Shami 5-53) by six wickets —*PTI*

## Rohit becomes 2nd fastest to complete 11,000 runs in ODI

**DUBAI, 20 FEB**

India captain Rohit Sharma on Thursday became the second fastest batter after compatriot Virat Kohli to complete 11,000 runs in One-day Internationals during their Champions Trophy clash against Bangladesh here. Rohit is only the fourth Indian and 10th batter overall to reach the mark in the 50-over format.

The skipper achieved the feat in the fourth over of India's chase of 229 in their Group A match when he hit Mustafizur Rahman over mid-on for a boundary.

The seasoned opener reached the mark in his 270th game and is the second fastest behind Kohli to cross 11,000 runs in terms of innings. —*PTI*

## Pak team arrives in Dubai

The Pakistan cricket team arrived here on Thursday for the marquee Champions Trophy clash against arch-rivals India scheduled for 23 February, hoping to get their campaign back on track after the 60-run loss to New Zealand in the tournament opener.

## Afghanistan eye another good show

**KARACHI, 20 FEB**

Afghanistan vs SA Match starts at **2.00 pm IST**

Debutants Afghanistan will aim to continue their impressive rise in white-ball cricket, while South Africa will once again attempt to shed the 'chokers' tag when the two sides kick off their Champions Trophy campaign here on Friday.

The inaugural Champions Trophy in 1998, which was called the Knockout Trophy at that time, remains the only ICC men's senior title that South Africa has secured despite having produced some of the world's greatest cricketers, especially in the limited-overs format. The Proteas boast of a well-balanced squad with a formidable batting lineup. While skipper Temba Bavuma, Tony de Zorzi, Rassie van der Dussen, and Aiden Markram will anchor the top order, the big-hitting trio of Heinrich Klaasen, David Miller and Tristan Stubbs are well-equipped to provide the final flourish.

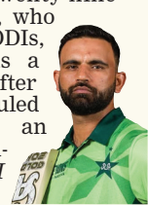
South Africa's biggest challenge heading into the tournament is their depleted bowling attack as key pacers Anrich Nortje, Nandre Burger, and Gerald Coetzee are ruled out due to injuries.

Known for his pace, aggression, and knack of striking at crucial moments, Kagiso Rabada will be the Proteas' key weapon in both the powerplay and death overs. —*PTI*

## Imam-ul-Haq replaces injured Fakhar Zaman

The Pakistan cricket team suffered a setback ahead of its Champions Trophy clash against India after opener Fakhar Zaman was ruled out owing to a recurring knee injury, prompting the inclusion of Imam-ul-Haq in the squad that left for Dubai on Thursday.

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) made the change after getting approval from the International Cricket Council's Event Technical Committee. The match against India is to be held on Sunday at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium. "Twenty-nine-year-old Imam, who has played 72 ODIs, was named as a replacement after Fakhar was ruled out due to an oblique injury,". —*PTI*



## Venus gets a wild-card entry for Indian Wells

**INDIAN WELLS, 20 FEB**

Venus Williams received a wild-card entry Wednesday for the BNP Paribas Open, which would make next month's tournament in Indian Wells, California, the seven-time Grand Slam singles champion's first event in nearly a full year. The 44-year-old Williams hasn't competed anywhere on tour since a first-round loss at the Miami Open on March 19, 2024. That was less than two weeks after she lost her opening match at Indian Wells.

Her first appearance at Indian Wells came in 1994. Williams won five titles at Wimbledon and two at the U.S. Open in singles, along with 14 Grand Slam doubles titles with her younger sister, Serena. Other wild-card recipients announced Wednesday include two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova who is returning to action after a 15-month break while giving birth to her first child and teenagers Fonseca and Learner Tien. Fonseca, 18, won his first ATP title at the Argentina Open this month. —*PTI*

## WPGT: VANI SIZZLES WITH 66 TO TAKE A 5-SHOT LEAD

**PUNE, 20 FEB**

Vani Kapoor played one of her best rounds while carding a bogey-free 5-under 66 to open a five-shot lead in the third leg of the Hero Women's Pro Golf Tour here on Thursday.

With three birdies on the front nine and two more on the backstretch, Vani added 66 to her first-round 70 to get to six-under 136 for 36 holes at the Poona Club Golf Course.

Vani, who has the most titles among all the active players on the Tour, is five ahead of Sneha Singh, winner of the second leg.

Sneha, who opened bogey-bogey shot even par 71 and is 1-under 141.

Amandeep Drall (70) and Hitaashee Bakshi (71), playing her first Tour event of 2025, are tied for third at even par 142. —*PTI*

WOMEN'S PREMIER LEAGUE

## Mandhana's RCB eye hat-trick of wins

**BENGALURU, 20 FEB**

Having set the pace with back-to-back emphatic victories, defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru would be eyeing a hat-trick of success against a star-studded Mumbai Indians in a WPL match at home here on Friday.

Smriti Mandhana's RCB hasn't put a foot wrong so far, be it chasing an imposing 200-plus target against Gujarat Giants or overhauling a tricky 140-odd runs against Delhi Capitals.

Their overall strength has come to the fore in the two games they have played this season and are now leading the five-team chart with four points and a healthy net run rate. No other team so far has won all its matches.

RCB would be guaranteed an incredible reception when they play their first game this season at their iconic Chinnaswamy Stadium, and Mandhana, who had broken DC's back with a blazing 47-ball 81 in the previous game, would be eyeing an encore. The India vice-captain has been in red-hot form, bagging the ICC Women's ODI Cricketer of the Year award for 2024 and also being named to the ICC Women's T20I Team of the Year, and that streak of genius was evident in the way she disdainfully amassed her runs against DC.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru captain Smriti Mandhana celebrates with teammates PHOTO: BCCI

RCB vs MUMBAI Match starts at **7.30 pm IST**

If it was a one-player show against DC, the resilience of the middle-order came to the fore against GG, whose lineup is a virtual who's who in international women's cricket.

The likes of Ellyse Perry, Raghvi Bist, Richa Ghosh, and young Kanika Ahuja rose to the occasion to make the task look easy, winning by six wickets with plenty of balls to spare. Though RCB looked a bit thin on the bowling front, leaking far too many runs with teenage pacer VJ Joshitha conceding 43 in her four overs and Australian stalwart Georgia Wareham giving away 50 in her three overs, it was a much-improved bowling performance against DC.—*PTI*

## Pankaj Advani clinches 14th Asian C'ship title

**DOHA, 20 FEB**

PHOTO: PANKAJ ADVANI/INSTAGRAM

Indian cue sports maestro Pankaj Advani has once again showcased his brilliance on the international stage, capturing an unprecedented 14th gold medal at the Asian Snooker Championship here.

The triumph comes just days after he won the National Snooker Championship in Indore, proving yet again why he remains the country's most celebrated cueist.

Advani's victory in Doha adds to an already staggering list of accolades.

He now holds five Asian snooker titles (across 15-red, 6-reds, and team formats) alongside nine Asian billiards titles, and his two Asian Games gold medals (2006, 2010) further highlight his dominance.

With this latest win, he inches closer to an unprecedented achievement winning the National, Asian, and World Snooker Championships in a single calendar year.

Having already accomplished this feat in billiards, completing it in snooker would make him the only player in history to do so in both disciplines. The final against Iran's Amir Sarkhosh was a battle of champions. —*PTI*

## Mirra, 17, scores Iga upset in Dubai

**DUBAI, 20 FEB**

17-year-old Mirra Andreeva stormed into her first WTA 1000 semifinal on Thursday, shocking Iga Swiatek, 6-3, 6-3 at the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships.

Andreeva, the No. 12 seed earned her second career win over a Top 2 player in eight months, backing up a Roland Garros win over then-No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka with a first win over Swiatek, avenging a three-set Cincinnati Open defeat to the former world No. 1 in 96 minutes on Center Court. Indeed, the pair are in the early stages of what looks to be a thrilling rivalry, having last faced off in 2024 at the WTA 1000 event in Cincinnati. Andreeva won the first set there before narrowly losing the second and third to Swiatek, and the youngster looked raring for revenge after a busy week in Dubai. Rainy conditions on Tuesday forced the youngster to play two matches on Wednesday, but Andreeva was apt for the test, defeating both Marketa Vondrousova and Peyton Stearns in straight sets to book the rematch with Swiatek.

Meanwhile, Swiatek, who saw a three-year unbeaten streak in Doha end at the hands of Jelena Ostapenko, has looked strong in Dubai, winning a 6-0 set in each of her two matches against Victoria Azarenka and Dayana Yastremska. —*PTI*

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

## *Mbappé hat trick for Real dumps Man City*

**LONDON, 20 FEB**

Kylian Mbappé scored a hat trick, Erling Haaland stayed on the bench injured and Real Madrid dumped Manchester City out of the Champions League on Wednesday.

Mbappé's stellar trio of goals in the fourth, 33rd, and 61st minutes in a 3-1 win gave Madrid a 6-3 victory on aggregate over the 2023 champion in their two-leg knockout playoff.

"This has been the complete performance attack, defense, with the ball and without the ball, we showed such high levels of quality," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "Almost the perfect night."

One superstar striker was watched by another from the sidelines. Haaland was not fit to start for an ultimately overmatched Man City because of a knee injury sustained late in a Premier League game Saturday.

Paris Saint-Germain beat French rival Brest 7-0, to run up a 10-0 aggregate score, and will play either Liverpool or Barcelona in the round of 16.

PSV Eindhoven ousted Juventus in the only one of the eight playoffs this week that went to extra time. Defender Ryan Flamingo scored in the 98th minute for a 3-1 win on the night and 4-3 on aggregate. United States international Timothy Weah scored for Juventus.

Kylian Mbappé scored a hat trick

Mbappé's first goal of the two-leg playoff in Manchester was a lucky miscue, a looping effort off his shin to level at 1-1 in what ended a 3-2 win.

His three goals in Madrid were classy and decisive. A first-time lob over City goalkeeper Ederson who perhaps advanced too far, too soon was followed by a low shot after leaving defender Joško Gvardiol on the turf.

The third was a powerful left-footer from the edge of the penalty area when he had lured six Man City players toward encircling him. —*PTI*

## SALAH'S SCORE SETS UP EQUALIZER AS LIVERPOOL DRAWS 2-2 AT VILLA

**LONDON, 20 FEB**

Mohamed Salah scored one goal and set up the equalizer by Trent Alexander-Arnold in Liverpool's 2-2 draw at Aston Villa that stretched its lead in the Premier League to eight points on Wednesday.

Salah tucked away with his league-leading 24th goal of the campaign to put Liverpool ahead at Villa Park in the 29th minute, only for the leaders to fall behind by half-time following a volley by Youri Tielemans and a header from Ollie Watkins.

Alexander-Arnold ran onto an inside pass from Salah and drove in a shot that deflected past Villa goalkeeper Emi Martinez in the 61st as Liverpool salvaged a point from an end-to-end game, avoiding what would have been just a second league defeat of the season.

It remains to be seen whether this was a good point for Liverpool in one of the toughest away fixtures in the league or two more dropped points, a week after a 2-2 draw at local rival Everton. "We desired more," Liverpool manager Arne Slot said, "and that is the only thing we can blame ourselves for a few times now we did not get what we deserved.—*PTI*